

Lincoln and the Ethics of Emancipation: Universalism, Nationalism, Exceptionalism

Dorothy Ross

In the history of emancipation, the ethical dimension is always prominent. Since the 1960s emancipation has been influentially portrayed as a result of the gradual, halting, but growing triumph of universalist liberal and Christian principles, a key moment in a progressive national narrative of growing freedom. The abolitionists stand astride the story as prophetic and ultimately triumphant voices of principle. We have good reasons to accept that account; universalist ethical principles and abolitionist determination were essential to emancipation. Inspired by the civil rights movement and the ongoing struggle for racial equality, the recovery of the importance of universal principles of human rights in ending slavery in the United States is a major achievement of historiography over the last half century. But the history of emancipation and its implications are skewed if we ignore the complex ethical role of the nation in the process leading to emancipation. As Edward L. Ayers suggested, the current narrative too easily “reassures Americans by reconciling the great anomaly of slavery with an overarching story of a people devoted to liberty.” It distorts our understanding of both emancipation and the nation at a crucial moment of their intertwined history.¹

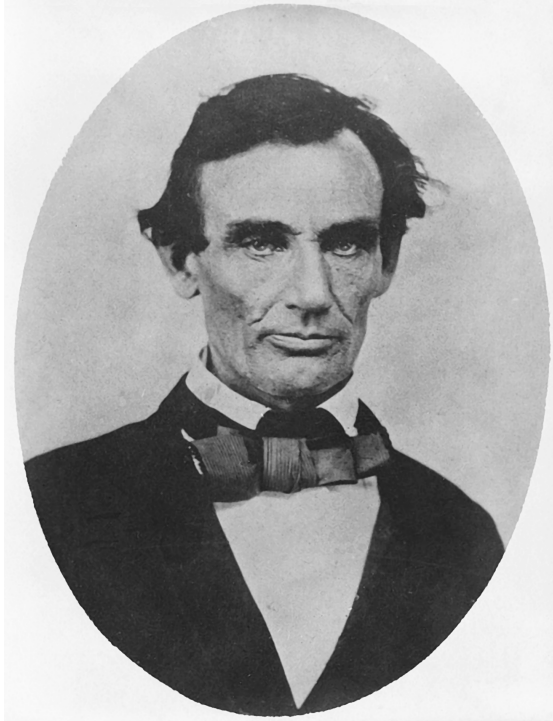
The nation, of course, has never been absent from considerations of the Civil War era when slavery was abolished. The nation can hardly be removed from the war to save the Union, and the war is always seen as a condition enabling emancipation and the Reconstruction amendments. But the nation has not been always or fully considered as an ethical factor in its own right. This essay is an effort to bring the nation back into the ethics of emancipation. Human rights were always weighed in a moving context, not only of interests and fears but also of other values, and the other value most prominently at work in the abolition of slavery in the United States was the nation. If we reconsider emancipation with that value in view, allegiance to the nation becomes a decisive ethical factor in the abolition of slavery and an ambiguous one, both blocking and advancing emancipation,

Dorothy Ross is Arthur O. Lovejoy Professor Emerita of History at Johns Hopkins University.

She would like to thank Ira Berlin, François Furstenberg, Michael Johnson, and Caleb McDaniel for helpful and challenging comments on this article in various stages of its preparation.

Readers may contact Ross at dotross@comcast.net.

¹ An influential source of the narrative of growing liberty in which emancipation is spearheaded by abolitionist principle and realized in civil war is the work of James M. McPherson, chiefly James M. McPherson, *The Struggle for Equality: Abolitionists and the Negro in the Civil War and Reconstruction* (1964; Princeton, 1995); James M. McPherson, *The Abolitionist Legacy: From Reconstruction to the NAACP* (Princeton, 1975); and James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York, 1988). For astute reviews of that national narrative, see Edward L. Ayers, “Worrying about the Civil War,” in *Moral Problems in American Life*, ed. Karen Halttunen and Lewis Perry (Ithaca, 1998), 145–66, esp. 156; and Michael Johnson, “Battle Cry of Freedom?,” *Reviews in American History*, 17 (June 1989), 214–18.



This photograph of Abraham Lincoln was taken on October 1, 1858, after he had delivered a campaign speech in Pittsfield, Illinois, in his unsuccessful bid for the U.S. Senate. His shrewd but defensive gaze and correct dress reveal him as a cautious, astute, and determined politician. *Photograph by Calvin Jackson. Courtesy Library of Congress, Prints and Photograph Division, LS-USZ6-2446.*

expanding and limiting commitment to human rights. In that story, Abraham Lincoln stands as both an important actor and an exemplar of the conflicting ethical implications of American nationalism.

David Brion Davis's magisterial work is the major source in contemporary historiography for the centrality of the century-long rise of antislavery sentiment in the abolition of slavery in the United States and the Atlantic West.² As Davis showed, at its core the moral argument against slavery was about the character of humanity—what enlightened thinkers called, using the generic masculine, the true nature of man. In the Anglo-American world, the Protestant and Enlightenment shift toward humanistic values endowed human nature with new dignity, with new capacity for reason, benevolence, and moral choice, and with inherent rights.³ The Anglo-American shift in moral consciousness began to occur just as the North American colonies turned to universal natural rights to

² David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (Ithaca, 1966); David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770–1823* (Ithaca, 1975). On emancipation in the United States as the product of contingent events and “a century’s moral achievement,” see David Brion Davis, *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* (New York, 2006), esp. 330–31.

³ On universalist principles of human rights, see Davis, *Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution*, 39–83, 255–342; Knud Haakonssen, “From Natural Law to the Rights of Man: A European Perspective on American Debates,” in *A Culture of Rights: The Bill of Rights in Philosophy, Politics, and Law, 1791–1991*, ed. Michael J. Lacey and Knud Haakonssen (Cambridge, Eng., 1991), 19–61; Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights* (New York, 2007); and Jerome J. Shestack, “The Philosophic Foundations of Human Rights,” *Human Rights Quarterly*, 20 (May 1998), 201–34.

declare their independence from Britain, energizing the ideals of human equality and self-determination. Liberal and evangelical Christianity called individuals to action, fueling the rise of abolition. Humanity's common, categorical right to liberty undermined the justification of slavery in the eighteenth century and culminated in the egalitarian thrust of Civil War and Reconstruction.

As all historians have recognized, the argument for human rights faced formidable obstacles. The combination of material advantage, class authority, and political power that can be summed up in the term "interest" was probably the most challenging, but close behind was the widespread fear that emancipation would let loose a bloodbath, as whites imagined the violence they were inflicting on blacks turned back against themselves. Moreover, as Davis emphasized, Christian and Enlightenment principles left ample room for qualifying judgments. The continuing hierarchical understanding of the Christian cosmos, of natural qualities, and of social organization allowed the abridgment of common humanity. Many Americans north as well as south rejected the argument against slavery altogether on moral grounds, relying instead on biblical authority and racial science. Many argued that liberal rights applied only to persons who demanded and were capable of exercising them and that Africans lacked the capacity for freedom. In the democratizing antebellum decades, the more powerful the language of equal rights became, the more racial differences were amplified. Given those barriers to the recognition of universal human rights, it is not surprising that historians have put their ultimate triumph in the Civil War and Reconstruction at the ethical center of emancipation history.⁴

Historians' understanding of Lincoln now conforms to that story of emancipation. Although some popular traditions, particularly those of African Americans, had long regarded Lincoln as the Great Emancipator, early twentieth-century historians had placed his greatness elsewhere—in saving the Union, elevating the common man, or moderating the fanaticism of radicals and secessionists alike. During the twentieth century's second reconstruction, historians began to emphasize instead Lincoln's human rights credentials. Lincoln claimed a long-standing revulsion from the inhumanity of slavery, and during the 1850s he outspokenly declared it morally wrong. In an 1854 speech in Peoria, Illinois, that laid out the basic position he was to take on slavery until 1863, he grounded his ethical stance in classical liberal doctrine: "The proposition that each man should do precisely as he pleases with all which is exclusively his own, lies at the foundation of the sense of justice there is in me," he declared. "The doctrine of self government is right—absolutely and eternally right." Whether the principle of self-government applied to the Negro depended simply on "whether a negro is *not* or is a man," a question whose answer he never doubted.⁵

⁴ Davis, *Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution*, 255–342. On the rise of racial theory and racism, see Bruce Dain, *A Hideous Monster of the Mind: American Race Theory in the Early Republic* (Cambridge, Mass., 2002); George M. Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817–1914* (1971; Hanover, 1987); Reginald Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny: The Origins of American Racial Anglo-Saxonism* (Cambridge, Mass., 1981); Joanne Pope Melish, *Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and "Race" in New England, 1780–1860* (Ithaca, 1998); and James Brewer Stewart, "The Emergence of Racial Modernity and the Rise of the White North, 1790–1840," *Journal of the Early Republic*, 18 (Summer 1998), 181–217. On liberal argument in defense of black slavery see François Furstenberg, *In the Name of the Father: Washington's Legacy, Slavery, and the Making of a Nation* (New York, 2006), 187–222. On defense of the morality of slavery, see Drew Faust, *A Sacred Circle: The Dilemma of the Intellectual in the Old South* (Baltimore, 1977); and Mark A. Noll, *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (New York, 2002), 386–401.

⁵ Merrill D. Peterson, *Lincoln in American Memory* (New York, 1994); George M. Fredrickson, *Big Enough to Be Inconsistent: Abraham Lincoln Confronts Slavery and Race* (Cambridge, Mass., 2008), 46–48; Abraham Lincoln to

Lincoln's historical reputation suffered, however, when his racial views came under closer scrutiny. During the 1850s Lincoln had made clear that for all their equal humanity, he could not imagine blacks as equal citizens of the Republic: If we free them, he asked, shall we "make them politically and socially, our equals? My own feelings will not admit of this; and if they would, we well know that those of the great mass of white people will not." He did not indulge in the flagrant race-baiting of his political opponents, but he had no problem repeatedly denying the Democrats' charges that he favored Negro equality. Lincoln believed that the only long-term solution to slavery was voluntary colonization, and he clung to the last shreds of that idea even as he issued the wartime Emancipation Proclamation. Expressing the racially conscious view of Lincoln, George Fredrickson aptly characterized him as someone who believed the Negro to be "a man but not a brother."⁶

Despite that historiographical turn, an effort to rehabilitate Lincoln as the Great Emancipator has worked to regain lost ground. Historians invoked not only Lincoln's moral condemnation of slavery during the 1850s but also the change in his position on emancipation and civil rights during the Civil War, although how far and at what speed he changed is still disputed. Those historians emphasize the boldness of Lincoln's moves against slavery and explain his racist remarks as necessary, if regrettable, political rhetoric on the road to emancipation. Even if tarnished by racist politics, Lincoln's advancing liberal principles annexed his story to the larger emancipation narrative.⁷

That view has not altogether dominated Lincoln historiography. A number of Lincoln's biographers believe, as did the historian David Potter, that Lincoln "always regarded the perpetuation of the Union as more important than the abolition of slavery." The recent efforts to emphasize Lincoln's emancipationist credentials, Fredrickson asserted—and I agree—"have not been able to reverse the priorities."⁸ Historians and political theorists, meanwhile, have given renewed attention to nationalism, providing new ways to address the historiographical divide. To understand Lincoln's changing moral stance toward slavery and emancipation, it must be examined in the context of his allegiance to the na-

Joshua F. Speed, Aug. 24, 1855, in *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Roy P. Basler (8 vols., New Brunswick, 1953), II, 320–23; Abraham Lincoln, "Speech at Peoria," Oct. 16, 1854, *ibid.*, 265–66, 271. Throughout this essay, I attribute to Abraham Lincoln only his written words or speeches recorded at the time.

⁶ Lincoln, "Speech at Peoria," 256; Eric Foner, "Lincoln and Colonization," in *Our Lincoln: New Perspectives on Lincoln and His World*, ed. Eric Foner (New York, 2008), 161–62; George M. Fredrickson, "A Man but Not a Brother: Abraham Lincoln and Racial Equality," *Journal of Southern History*, 41 (Feb. 1975), 39–58. For an expanded account that largely reaffirmed his earlier judgment, see Fredrickson, *Big Enough to Be Inconsistent*. On historians' views of Lincoln in regard to race, see *ibid.*, 9–28; and Peterson, *Lincoln in American Memory*, 350–58, 384.

⁷ For works that emphasize Lincoln's emancipationist and egalitarian motives and attribute his contrary statements to political style and expediency but apply political analysis asymmetrically, ignoring the political motives that fueled Lincoln's antislavery actions, see La Wanda Cox, *Lincoln and Black Freedom: A Study in Presidential Leadership* (Columbia, S.C., 1981); James Oakes, *The Radical and the Republican: Frederick Douglass, Abraham Lincoln, and the Triumph of Antislavery Politics* (New York, 2007); and Richard Striner, *Father Abraham: Lincoln's Relentless Struggle to End Slavery* (New York, 2006). For a contrasting view that attributes Lincoln's support for antislavery to both Christian principle and "shrewd political pragmatism," see Richard J. Carwardine, *Lincoln: Profiles in Power* (London, 2003), 43–89, esp. 81. Other works emphasize Lincoln's moral leadership on emancipation but regard his cautious political leadership as virtuous prudence; see William Lee Miller, *Lincoln's Virtues: An Ethical Biography* (New York, 2002); and Allen C. Guelzo, *Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation* (New York, 2004). See also Peterson, *Lincoln in American Memory*, 298–310, 327–40, 348–58, 382–84.

⁸ David Potter quoted in Fredrickson, *Big Enough to Be Inconsistent*, 85. For George M. Fredrickson's view, see *ibid.*, 81–126, esp. 85. For other works that give full weight to Lincoln's Unionism and temper his emancipationist credentials, see Mark E. Neely Jr., *The Last Best Hope of Earth: Abraham Lincoln and the Promise of America* (Cambridge, Mass., 1993), 100; William E. Gienapp, *Abraham Lincoln and Civil War America: A Biography* (New York, 2002), 99–125; and the classic contemporary biography: David Herbert Donald, *Lincoln* (New York, 1995), 15, 133–37, 362–69.

tion. My purpose is not to weigh his moral principles against his political calculations as most recent studies have done, for he was adept at combining them, but to clarify the ethical consequences of his adherence to two values—the American nation and universal liberty—to which he was sincerely but unequally devoted.

In placing universal moral principles, rather than nationality, at the center of the history of emancipation, historians reflect not only the contemporary interest in human rights but also the way ethical issues are understood in modern America's liberal culture. Liberals ground ethical obligation in persons' universal capacity for reason and moral will. The universal principles generated by reason are what command allegiance and determine obligation; they are what moral argument is about. In contrast, particularist ethical theories, which center obligation on social relationships, carry less weight. Particularist theories are based on individuals' embeddedness in social groups, and group membership generates moral commitments that range as narrowly or widely as communal identification.⁹ Nationality, like membership in a family or local community, is a social relationship that enters into one's identity and is a source of moral obligation. Unlike the face-to-face communities of family or neighborhood, the nation is an "imagined community," but one so deeply implanted in identity by ideology and shared culture that, as Rogers M. Smith noted, the obligations it imposes "legitimately trump many of the demands made on its members in the name of other associations." According to universalist liberal logic, however, allegiance to a nation is suspect precisely because it entails obligations only for its members and gives special moral consideration to the life of the nation.¹⁰

Given the strength of liberal premises in modern American culture, it is understandable that the nation is not sufficiently acknowledged in discussions of the ethics of emancipation. Yet during the nineteenth century, a still-powerful republican heritage and newer currents of romantic nationalism made the American nation into a high moral good. The nation in nineteenth-century America, as in Europe, was understood as a group of people who constituted a political, cultural, and territorial community. In the United States, "Republic" and "Union," each with its own distinctive meanings, also conveyed the sense of nationhood. First and foremost, Americans understood themselves as a political community, created by the historical event of the Revolution and the political institutions of Republic and Constitution. By the 1830s, 1840s, and 1850s, a period of both sectional conflict and nation building, the term "Union" was commonly employed to express both the nation's unity and its careful structure of decentralized power. Whether defined as a polity and people united by common language, laws, and ancestry or as a political union bound together by historical affiliation, fraternal feeling, and the principle of states' rights, the Union was invested with the sentiments of nationality.¹¹

⁹ The disjunction between these two starting points for moral theory has been central to the liberal-communitarian debates of the past decades. See David Miller, *On Nationality* (New York, 1995); Nancy L. Rosenblum, ed., *Liberalism and the Moral Life* (Cambridge, Mass., 1989); Shlomo Avineri and Avner de-Shalit, eds., *Communitarianism and Individualism* (New York, 1992); Philip Selznick, *The Moral Commonwealth: Social Theory and the Promise of Community* (Berkeley, 1992); and George P. Fletcher, *Loyalty: An Essay on the Morality of Relationships* (New York, 1993).

¹⁰ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London, 1991); Rogers M. Smith, *Stories of Peoplehood: The Politics and Morals of Political Membership* (Cambridge, Eng., 2003), 20; Miller, *On Nationality*.

¹¹ On the nation, see Anthony D. Smith, *National Identity* (London, 1991), 1–18; and Thomas Bender, *A Na-*

The United States, like other modern nations, was created by deliberate cultural construction, the work of elites whose political, cultural, and economic interests were thereby advanced.¹² Hoping to link liberty and order, postcolonial elites launched campaigns to instill love of country, loyalty to republican principles and institutions, and fraternal feeling. Their efforts bore fruit in the patriotic rhetoric of literature, schoolbooks, political speech, and public ritual. National government in the antebellum United States was notoriously weak, but nationalist ideology was strong. Smith has traced the power of ideology to construct nationality to “ethically constitutive stories” that create “potent moral affirmations of particular identities.” The “ethically constitutive story” Americans told located the nation in the historical American people, their liberal-republican political institutions, and the democratic opportunity those institutions fostered. The story joined elite interests to those of the expanding white male electorate and grounded both in libertarian and egalitarian values. The nation’s unity and its members’ mutual obligation were often expressed in the language of family—the founding generation figured as “fathers” who linked the generations across time and fraternal sentiment as the glue that held brothers together in the face of partisan, class, and sectional conflict. The nation, like the family, formed its members’ identities and anchored their ethical world.¹³

Nationalist ideology cast the principles of liberty and republican government as both particular to the American nation and universal. Universal liberty was said to be specially seated in the United States. Repudiating the political and social oppression of Europe—the American story went—the Revolution and Constitution made America the first modern republic, governed by the free consent of the people, specially constructed and favored by nature to escape the fatal tendency of all previous republics to decline into corruption, class conflict, and tyranny. Conservative southerners, according to Nicholas Guyatt, were satisfied with limited versions of the national story, with “national survival instead of the world’s redemption.” The more popular nationalist idioms placed the new nation at the forefront of the worldwide movement toward liberty, giving the United States a unique, universally significant place in history that grew in importance as liberal revolutions rose and then faltered in Europe. Historians have often called this ethically constitutive story American exceptionalism because America, more than any other country, was said to exemplify the universal ideals ordained by world history. For most nineteenth-century Americans, Providence or an active personal God guided history, and nationalist ideology regularly attributed the American narrative to those divine sources. Some orthodox Christians and some skeptics, declining to claim knowledge of God’s will in history, distanced themselves from the national ideology. Where it held sway, however, America was at once the actual nation and the ideal one decreed by God, nature, and history.¹⁴

tion among Nations: America’s Place in World History (New York, 2006), 116–81. On Unionism as the commonest antebellum form of American nationalism, see Rogan Kersh, *Dreams of a More Perfect Union* (Ithaca, 2001), 2–17, 104–52.

¹² On the modern nation as a project of cultural construction, see Smith, *Stories of Peoplehood*, 32–42; and David A. Bell, *The Cult of the Nation in France: Inventing Nationalism, 1680–1800* (Cambridge, Mass., 2001), 1–22.

¹³ Smith, *Stories of Peoplehood*, 102. On the construction of American nationalism, see Furstenberg, *In the Name of the Father*; Merle Curti, *The Roots of American Loyalty* (New York, 1946); Rush Welter, *The Mind of America, 1820–1860* (New York, 1975); Jean H. Baker, *Affairs of Party: The Political Culture of Northern Democrats in the Mid-nineteenth Century* (Ithaca, 1983), 71–91; David Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes: The Making of American Nationalism, 1776–1820* (Chapel Hill, 1997); and Cynthia M. Koch, “Teaching Patriotism: Private Virtue for the Public Good in the Early Republic,” in *Bonds of Affection: Americans Define Their Patriotism*, ed. John Bodnar (Princeton, 1996), 19–52.

¹⁴ On American exceptionalism as a nationalist ideology grounded in republican history and Protestant belief,

When historical discussions of emancipation have taken nationalism into account, the particular American nation has been overshadowed by the universal ethical principles attached to it. Yet the nation carried its own moral value and historical particularities. Linking universal principle to national identity is in any case problematic. The nation and its principles can energize each other, but they are also made hostage to each other. The alliance not only joins obligations that are in theory incommensurable; it requires that the actual nation enact the universal ideals it claims.¹⁵

If America and liberty have been fused in ideology, they have hardly been seamless in practice, and the disjunction is nowhere more glaring than in regard to slavery. Despite the rise of antislavery sentiment during the Revolution, the Founders had placed crucial supports for slavery in the Constitution and omitted the natural law language of the Declaration of Independence, for the inalienable rights useful in starting a revolution were deemed disruptive in framing a stable social order, especially one that included slavery. Even as northern states gradually abolished slavery and white men gained new kinds of freedom, slavery deepened its hold in the South and northern jurists retreated from the human rights claims of natural law for the limits imposed by positive law. The Union was understood north and south to be a compact between free and slave societies, a hybrid slaveholding republic. To call that duality into question was to threaten the existence of the nation. From the formation of the Constitution on, allegiance to the actual nation was thus an obstacle to emancipation. The nation's fundamental political and legal framework immobilized universalist arguments for emancipation.¹⁶

Nationalist ideology had the capacity both to confirm the dual slaveholding republic and to challenge its contradictions. As the historiography of emancipation has emphasized, nationalist ideology exposed the contradiction of slavery and propagated human rights principles in the United States as elsewhere in the Western world. Abolitionists unreservedly adopted the universalist logic of American nationalism and reshaped their particularist allegiance to fit. Few pushed universalism as far as William Lloyd Garrison, who denied any moral weight to nationality if it abridged universal benevolence. Yet even for Garrison, the motto "our country is the world" expressed a two-pronged allegiance, one that he and other abolitionists owned when civil war broke out. For African American spokesmen, as for most abolitionists, the nationalist language of liberty remained throughout the antebellum decades a major resource for universal principle. Hosea Eas-

see Dorothy Ross, "American Exceptionalism," in *A Companion to American Thought*, ed. Richard Wightman Fox and James T. Kloppenberg (Cambridge, Mass., 1995), 22–23; Dorothy Ross, *The Origins of American Social Science* (Cambridge, Eng., 1991), 22–30; Noll, *America's God*, 53–92, 422–38; Sydney E. Ahlstrom, "Religion, Revolution, and the Rise of Modern Nationalism: Reflections on the American Experience," *Church History*, 44 (Dec. 1975), 492–504; Nicholas Guyatt, *Providence and the Invention of the United States, 1607–1876* (New York, 2007), esp. 256; and Mark Y. Hanley, *Beyond a Christian Commonwealth: The Protestant Quarrel with the American Republic, 1830–1860* (Chapel Hill, 1994). For a more heterogeneous conception of American exceptionalism, see Michael Kammen, "The Problem of American Exceptionalism: A Reconsideration," *American Quarterly*, 45 (March 1993), 1–43.

¹⁵ Bender, *Nation among Nations*, 116–81; McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, vii–viii, and passim. On the inextricability of principle from particularity in liberal nationalism, see Smith, *Stories of Peoplehood*, 88–92; and Bernard Yack, "The Myth of the Civic Nation," *Critical Review*, 10 (Spring 1996), 193–211. On incommensurability, see Steven Lukes, *Moral Conflict and Politics* (Oxford, Eng., 1991), 3–20, 42–49.

¹⁶ On the retreat from the natural law principles of the Declaration of Independence, see Daniel T. Rodgers, *Contested Truths: Keywords in American Politics since Independence* (New York, 1987), 45–71; Robert M. Cover, *Antislavery and the Judicial Process* (New Haven, 1976); and Don E. Fehrenbacher, *The Slaveholding Republic: An Account of the United States Government's Relations to Slavery*, ed. Ward M. McAfee (New York, 2001). Although I use here Don Fehrenbacher's apt phrase, I depart from his view that only later political dynamics, not the design of the Constitution, was responsible for the compound character of the nation.

ton in the 1820s and 1830s, like Frederick Douglass in the 1850s, declared blacks and whites, slaves and freemen, to be members of the American nation and entitled to all the “Civil, Religious, and Social Privileges of the Country.” In the light of the declaration’s assertion of natural rights, Douglass interpreted the Constitution as an antislavery document and the nation as *potential* exemplar to the world.¹⁷

However, most white people in the United States, who had been conditioned by the existence of slavery, assumed that the inalienable rights conferred by the nation could be claimed only by whites. Although America’s ethically constitutive story bound its adherents to respect the human rights of all people, most white Americans denied blacks the common humanity and national membership that entitled them to equal respect. In the popular ethnoracial strain of nationalism, the Anglo-Saxon or, more broadly, the Caucasian race that founded the nation was considered uniquely capable of republican liberty both in America and the world and thus an essential basis of national identity. As the expansionist senator William H. Seward expressed it in 1850, the Americans were one “homogeneous” Caucasian people, while “the African race, bond and free,” was incapable of “assimilation and absorption,” an “inferior” mass and “disturbing” factor. For Seward and his “ruling homogeneous family,” race excluded blacks from the essential character of the nation.¹⁸

Yet Seward was an opponent of slavery, and in the same speech in which he defined the nation by race, he went on to declare that there was a “higher law”—a universal law of nature and God—that condemned slavery. In Seward as in many antebellum Americans, nationalist ideology may have aroused universalist antislavery ideals, but the ideals did not lead them to reconstitute the nation on universalist principle. One function of nationalist ideology is to cover over the contradictions between ideals and practice, to bathe the darker shades of national reality in the glow of the ideal.¹⁹ In the glow of American exceptionalism, black slavery could virtually disappear from the identity of the nation. White consciences could be assured that despite the nation’s structural incorporation of slavery, America remained the embodiment of universal liberty.

The federal structure of the nation facilitated this strategy, and it was jealously guarded by the South’s robust version of states’ rights. Slavery could be considered a domestic institution under control of the states, virtually outside the domain of national power and identity.²⁰ For most whites, during much of the antebellum period, the exceptionalist link

¹⁷ Caleb McDaniel, “Our Country Is the World: Radical American Abolitionists Abroad” (Ph.D. diss., Johns Hopkins University, 2006); James Brewer Stewart, *Holy Warriors: The Abolitionists and American Slavery* (1976; New York, 1996); Paul Goodman, *Of One Blood: Abolitionism and the Origins of Racial Equality* (Berkeley, 1998); Patrick Rael, *Black Identity and Black Protest in the Antebellum North* (Chapel Hill, 2002); George R. Price and James Brewer Stewart, eds., *To Heal the Scourge of Prejudice: The Life and Writings of Hosea Easton* (Amherst, 1999), esp. 113; Frederick Douglass, “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?,” in *The Frederick Douglass Papers*, series 1, ed. John W. Blassingame et al. (5 vols., New Haven, 1979–1992), II, 359–88.

¹⁸ On ethnoracial nationalism, see Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny*; Kersh, *Dreams of a More Perfect Union*, 115–22; Thomas R. Hietala, *Manifest Design: Anxious Aggrandizement in Late Jacksonian America* (Ithaca, 1985); and Eric Kaufmann, “American Exceptionalism Reconsidered: Anglo-Saxon Ethnogenesis in the ‘Universal’ Nation, 1776–1850,” *Journal of American Studies*, 33 (Dec. 1999), 437–57. On the civic disabilities of free blacks, see Rogers M. Smith, *Civic Ideals: Conflicting Visions of Citizenship in U.S. History* (New Haven, 1997), 220–21, 243–71. George E. Baker, ed., *The Works of William H. Seward* (3 vols., New York, 1853), I, 56.

¹⁹ Baker, ed., *Works of William H. Seward*, I, 66–67, 74–75. On antebellum exceptionalist nationalism as a strategy of “relief” and “distraction” from sectional conflict and the existence of slavery, see Guyatt, *Providence and the Invention of the United States*, 214–58, esp. 256–57.

²⁰ David M. Potter, *The Impending Crisis, 1848–1861*, ed. Don E. Fehrenbacher (New York, 1976), 33, 46–47.

between nation and liberal principle probably obscured, rather than exposed, the profoundly contradictory values embedded in America's national self-conception.

Lincoln shared in this antebellum history of the nation and its uneasy complicity in slavery. He is a prime example of how universal principle and particular nation worked together—and against each other—toward emancipation.

As many historians have concluded, there is no better place to begin understanding Lincoln than one of his first public speeches, addressed to the Young Men's Lyceum of Springfield, Illinois, in 1838. His topic was "The Perpetuation of Our Political Institutions," a topic synonymous for Lincoln with the perpetuation of the nation. He defined the nation in accord with nineteenth-century nationalism as a particular historical people ("we, the American People"), with its own territory ("the fairest portion of the earth"), and a government that embodied universal values ("a political edifice of liberty and equal rights"). Using the language of exceptionalism, he described America's republican institutions as more conducive to liberty "than any of which the history of former times tells us." The duty of his generation was to bequeath the nation "undecayed by the lapse of time and untorn by usurpation, to the latest generation that fate shall permit the world to know." Like most Americans, but more consciously than most, Lincoln located the sources of that moral obligation in both the particular and universal meanings of the nation: "gratitude to our fathers, justice to ourselves, duty to posterity, and love for our species in general."²¹

Lincoln characterized this historical nation throughout the speech—and for the remainder of his life—as an intergenerational family. A "hardy, brave, and patriotic . . . race of ancestors" made the nation; we are their "inheritors." The task of his own generation was a problem for him because he had absorbed the fear of the republic's fragility that shadowed the exceptionalist narrative. In classical republican discourse, time is the enemy of the life of the republic, the bearer of decay and usurpation. Lincoln feared that historical circumstances now made maintenance of the American republic more difficult for the heirs than founding had been for the fathers. He saw around him increasing "disregard for law" and mob violence; in time, he feared, violence would make the people lose faith in their political institutions and succumb to a tyrant. Notably, the examples of violence he chose to mention were caused by abolitionist agitation or by slavery. Against this threat Lincoln urged: "Let every man remember that to violate the law, is to trample on the blood of his father, and to tear the character of his own, and his children's liberty. . . . Let reverence for the laws" become "the *political religion* of the nation." In other words, if the Republic was to fulfill its exceptionalist destiny and live forever, later generations must cling to first principles, the structure of law the fathers put in place.²²

²¹ Abraham Lincoln, "Address before the Young Men's Lyceum of Springfield," Jan. 27, 1838, in *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Basler, I, 108–15, esp. 108–9. Except when referring to the generic "country," Lincoln in this speech used the term "nation" to refer to the United States. He often did so thereafter, especially when emphasizing the whole people or the historic entity whose destiny hung in the balance. He first began to refer to the United States as the "Union" (in other than a generic sense of the "country") in October 1845, when discussing territorial issues, with Union also carrying the connotation of a union of states. During the 1850s he used Union more frequently than nation, most often with this double connotation of federalism and nationality. When secession turned to war, the Union became the name for the whole nation that the North now claimed to represent and was fighting to preserve. See, for example, Lincoln to Albert G. Hodges, April 4, 1864, *ibid.*, VII, 281.

²² Lincoln, "Address before the Young Men's Lyceum of Springfield," 109, 112.

There were undoubtedly personal reasons why Lincoln, from the outset of his career, believed so deeply in the nation as a moral good and felt so deeply the task of preserving it. For a poor, ambitious young man who distanced himself from his own father as he became a successful lawyer and Whig politician, the nation stood for the principles of liberal individualism, democratic equality, and national development that fueled his own rise in life and gave him a grander set of fathers. But he was not alone in this attachment. His generation had been educated in a language of nationalism that stressed familial ties, reverence for the Constitution, the exceptionalist mission of the American republic in world history, and the danger of republican decline. "As a nation of freemen, we must live through all time, or die by suicide," he said. Come what may, Lincoln was not going to be the son who allowed the nation to "die by suicide."²³

The American nation and the universal principles it embodied in world history remained Lincoln's central values for the remainder of his life. If he was aware of a conflict between nation and principle as he began his career, he accepted the exceptionalist claim of the slaveholding republic to be a bastion of liberty. By 1838, when he delivered his lyceum speech, abolitionists were beginning to loosen the ideological glue that held nation and principle together, but Lincoln inveighed against the violence that threatened the nation, set off by abolition and slavery both, rather than against slavery itself. Historians always credit Lincoln's reverence for the law and the Constitution, but Lincoln invoked it here specifically in service of maintaining the nation. As Fredrickson noted, his "constitutionalism and legalism as impediments to antislavery activism were . . . part and parcel of his reverence for the Union," and his constitutional scruples remained corollary to his nationalism throughout his political career.²⁴ For Lincoln especially, as for northerners generally, allegiance to the nation added powerful moral weight to the interest, fear, and racism that contained the emancipationist argument.

What began to change the balance of forces was the prospect of the extension of slavery into the trans-Mississippi territories in the mid-1840s. The territorial conflict for the first time mobilized a powerful northern interest against slavery that demanded "free soil" in the West while promising not to interfere with slavery where it already existed. As Lincoln said in 1854, "We want [these territories] for the homes of free white people. . . . Slave states are places for poor white people to remove FROM; not to remove TO. New free States are the places for poor people to go to and better their condition." More slave states would also compound the disadvantage in "control of the government" that northern voters already faced. The economic and political interests aroused by the territorial debate also brought into play America's national self-conception as a free nation, and the world's increasingly hostile judgment of slavery raised the stakes of the debate still further. Slavery in the South and free labor in the North were defended as moral goods necessary to the free identity of the white republic and its exceptionalist promise. As William R. Brock argued, "the relation of slavery to national character" was "the essential point of debate."²⁵

²³ *Ibid.*, 109. On Lincoln's and his generation's organic attachment to the nation understood as a bodily familial connection, see Paul W. Kahn, *Legitimacy and History: Self-Government in American Constitutional Theory* (New Haven, 1992), 32–64. For examples of the familial language of nationalism common in antebellum political discourse, see Major L. Wilson, *Space, Time, and Freedom: The Quest for Nationality and the Irrepressible Conflict, 1815–1861* (Westport, 1974); and George B. Forgie, *Patricide in the House Divided: A Psychological Interpretation of Lincoln and His Age* (New York, 1979).

²⁴ Fredrickson, *Big Enough to Be Inconsistent*, 52–53.

²⁵ Potter, *Impending Crisis*, ed. Fehrenbacher, 51–89; Lincoln, "Speech at Peoria," 268; Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free*

In the North the moral weight of national allegiance thus began to count *against* slavery, although not necessarily *for* emancipation. Many free-soil advocates expressed as much dislike of blacks as of slavery. Still, the relation of slavery to the nation's character reopened the question of the morality of slavery. John L. O'Sullivan, a Democratic spokesman for Manifest Destiny and noninterference with slavery, complained in 1845,

What has become of the Southern doctrine—what, of the Northern Democratic position—that the institution of slavery, whether good or evil, was a local and not a federal institution—with which the Free States had nothing to do—for which they were in no wise responsible, either to their own conscience or to the judgment of the world.²⁶

The identification with the nation roused by the free-soil debate could apparently bring home to individual consciences what abstract reason had not and force a fresh consideration of the nation's moral claims.

Certainly that appears to be true of Lincoln. In a free-soil statement of 1845 that urged the northern states to leave slavery alone where it already existed, Lincoln first registered a recognition that slavery could put American nationality and universal liberty at odds: "I hold it to be a paramount duty of us in the free states, due to the Union of the states, and perhaps to liberty itself (paradox though it may seem) to let the slavery of the other states alone." In 1845 as in 1838, Lincoln's "paramount" obligation remained his duty to preserve the nation and that meant preserving the slaveholding republic. The conflict between nation and principle was now visible, however, in his "paradox" and he worked to erase it. As theorists have shown, the incommensurability between universal moral principles and the obligations arising from particular social relations is one of the most vexing of liberal politics.²⁷ Lincoln saw the possibility that the nation's exceptionalist character might bridge the competing obligations to nation and liberty. Maintaining the slaveholding republic preserved the exceptionalist nation and thus "perhaps . . . (paradox though it may seem)" fulfilled the "duty of us in the free states" to "liberty itself." The conditional "perhaps" and the seeming "paradox" would soon disappear from his speeches. In the free-soil debate, allegiance to the exceptionalist nation allowed escape from the obligation to universal freedom even as it awakened universalist moral principles against slavery.

Lincoln's exceptionalist equation between the real and the ideal nation carried the stipulation, however, that slavery not be allowed to grow: "I hold it to be equally clear, that we should never knowingly lend ourselves directly or indirectly, to prevent that slavery from dying a natural death—to find new places for it to live in, when it can no longer exist in the old." For Lincoln, as for the free-soil movement generally, the underlying premise was that slavery in time would die "a natural death" if deprived of new lands. Whether Lin-

Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party before the Civil War (1970; New York, 1995), ix–xxxix, 11–72; Eugene D. Genovese and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *The Mind of the Master Class: History and Faith in the Southern Slaveholders' Worldview* (New York, 2005), 11–68, 225–46; William R. Brock, *Parties and Political Conscience: American Dilemmas, 1840–1850* (Millwood, 1979), 139. Two recent works differ in locating the aggressor in South and North, respectively, but both point up the importance of national identity in the discourse of sectional conflict: Manisha Sinha, *The Counter-Revolution of Slavery: Politics and Ideology in Antebellum South Carolina* (Chapel Hill, 2000); and Susan-Mary Grant, *North over South: Northern Nationalism and American Identity in the Antebellum Era* (Lawrence, 2000).

²⁶ John L. O'Sullivan quoted in Brock, *Parties and Political Conscience*, 147.

²⁷ Lincoln to Williamson Durley, Oct. 3, 1845, in *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Basler, I, 348; Lukes, *Moral Conflict and Politics*, 3–20.

coln ever looked into that premise is doubtful; as Don E. Fehrenbacher concluded, it appears in his writings as a vague “hope,” an assumption rather than an argument. The logic had plausibility, although slavery was proving increasingly adaptable in the old southeastern states and some southern writers were mounting credible arguments that slavery could flourish even as the South developed a more complex economy. The belief that slavery required new land was convenient both for southerners interested in expansion and for northerners hopeful that slavery would eventually disappear.²⁸

During the 1850s, when free soil moved to the center of the national political agenda, Lincoln moved into free-soil politics. When he eulogized his Whig hero Henry Clay in 1852, he still argued that the threat to the nation came from abolitionist extremists who would fragment the Union in the name of immediate emancipation. But now he also denounced the southern militants who would undermine the nation’s freedom. When an increasing number of southern spokesmen, in an effort to defend slavery as a positive good, began to attack the Declaration of Independence, Lincoln was truly alarmed. He viewed with “astonishment,” he said, those who “are beginning to assail and to ridicule the white-man’s charter of freedom—the declaration that ‘all men are created free and equal.’” Beware, he warned at Peoria, lest “in our greedy chase to make profit of the negro,” we destroy “even the white man’s charter of freedom.”²⁹

Spurred by this threat to the nation’s and the white man’s principled liberty, Lincoln spelled out in his Peoria speech in 1854 his categorical liberal defense of human rights for all, black and white: “The doctrine of self-government is right—absolutely and eternally right.” The declaration’s universalistic language of equality and inalienable natural rights, as the foundation of American liberty, was the foundation for the slave’s right to self-government as well as the white man’s. Only a firm moral position against slavery, Lincoln argued, not the popular sovereignty doctrine of his political rival, Stephen A. Douglas, could prevent the expansion of slavery and save the nation’s exceptionalist character. America’s world-historical mission was crucial to Lincoln, as he quoted criticism from “the liberal party of the world” and declared that “Our Republican robe is soiled.”³⁰

Still, republican liberty required the survival of the nation that bore it, and that nation was still a slaveholding republic. The human rights that Lincoln offered were thus limited. He restricted the principle of “self-government” to the realm of natural rights alone, centering it on the natural right of every man to the fruit of his own labor. He often followed up his declaration that blacks could not be the political and social equals of whites with a ringing affirmation of equal labor rights: The Negro may not be my equal, “but in the right to eat the bread, which his own hand earns, *he is my equal and . . . the equal of every living man.*” Not only would that line have struck a sympathetic chord for free-soil

²⁸ Lincoln to Durley, Oct. 3, 1845, in *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Basler, I, 348; Don E. Fehrenbacher, *Prelude to Greatness: Lincoln in the 1850s* (Stanford, 1962), 70–95, esp. 76–77; Fredrickson, *Big Enough to Be Inconsistent*, 49; Jay R. Carlander and W. Elliot Brownlee, “Antebellum Southern Political Economists and the Problem of Slavery,” *American Nineteenth Century History*, 7 (Sept. 2006), 389–416.

²⁹ Abraham Lincoln, “Eulogy on Henry Clay,” July 6, 1852, in *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Basler, II, 130; Lincoln, “Speech at Peoria,” 276.

³⁰ Lincoln, “Speech at Peoria,” 265–66, 276. On the role that the political rivalry with Stephen A. Douglas played in Lincoln’s framing of his free-soil position, see Fehrenbacher, *Prelude to Greatness*; and Fredrickson, *Big Enough to Be Inconsistent*, 40–41. For the political advantage of Lincoln’s moral argument against slavery, see Carwardine, *Lincoln*, xiv, 43–89.

audiences, it also conveniently shunted human equality away from political and social relations to the more circumscribed realm of work.³¹

While theorists had long distinguished between natural and political rights, the increasing democracy of the antebellum decades had blurred the distinction. Under the regime of white manhood suffrage, “equal rights” were popularly understood to encompass both the natural rights of the declaration and the political rights by which they were safeguarded. “Self-government” was at once a moral and political ideal. During his 1854 speech Lincoln himself admitted that the two were linked in principle. Arguing that the three-fifths clause of the Constitution denied northern whites the full weight of their votes, he declared “Allow ALL the governed an equal voice in the government, and that, and that only is self-government.” He quickly added, however, that in the case of blacks, “NECESSITY” forbade “political and social equality.”³² Lincoln and the free-soil movement forced a wedge into the right of self-government to avoid equal citizenship for blacks. Equal political and social rights would bestow on blacks and whites together full citizenship rights and a common fraternal identity; it would make Africans into African Americans, members of the nation as well as the human race.³³ Although Fredrickson was thinking of race when he concluded that for Lincoln the Negro was “a man but not a brother,” the phrase fits exactly the distinction between membership in humanity and membership in the nation that Lincoln and the free-soil Republicans drew.

In addition to narrowing the definition of human rights, allegiance to the nation continued to present a basic structural obstacle to universal liberty. As Lincoln wrote a southern friend, although slavery had always violated his moral sense, “I bite my lip, and keep quiet,” like most northerners, “in order to [remain loyal] to the constitution and the Union.” In his 1854 speech he made that priority clear: “Much as I hate slavery,” Lincoln admitted, “I would consent to the extension of it rather than see the Union dissolved, just as I would consent to any GREAT evil, to avoid a GREATER one.”³⁴ Throughout the decade, Lincoln tried to avoid having to choose between his two moral goods by tightening the identification of nation with liberty.

The way to end sectional conflict, Lincoln said, was to restore the principles that had defined the nation’s character: “If you would have the peace of the old times, re-adopt the precepts and policy of the old times.” The attempt to annul the destructive effects of time by a return to first principles was characteristic of the classical republican tradition and of Lincoln’s plea for the perpetuation of the nation. “Our fathers” had brought slavery into the Union and protected it by law only because of necessity, he argued; they *believed* that slavery was morally wrong and expected it to disappear. Lincoln wanted to restore both prongs of the original compromise: “Let us turn slavery from its claims of ‘moral right,’ back upon its existing legal rights, and its arguments of ‘necessity.’ Let us return it

³¹ Abraham Lincoln, “Speech at Springfield,” June 26, 1857, in *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Basler, II, 405; Abraham Lincoln, “First Debate with Stephen A. Douglas, at Ottawa,” Aug. 21, 1858, *ibid.*, III, 16. On the centrality for Lincoln of the right to free labor, see Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men*, 296; and Fredrickson, *Big Enough to Be Inconsistent*, 48, 65–66.

³² Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights*, 22–29; Rodgers, *Contested Truths*, 72–111; Sean Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln* (New York, 2005), xvii–xxiii; Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York, 1992), 229–305; Lincoln, “Speech at Peoria,” 266, 269.

³³ The legal citizenship rights granted to free blacks varied north and south and between northern states. While most northern courts accorded free blacks a minimum level of citizenship that conferred basic protection and required allegiance, they denied them equal citizenship rights. See Smith, *Civic Ideals*, 197–285, esp. 253–58.

³⁴ Lincoln to Speed, Aug. 24, 1855, in *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Basler, II, 320; Lincoln, “Speech at Peoria,” 270.

to the position our fathers gave it; and there let it rest in peace.” Here Lincoln is recasting the varied and complex motivations of the founding generation into his own binary position. “Necessity” for Lincoln was the necessity to maintain slavery where it existed, because he believed that was the only way to maintain the nation and because he did not believe emancipation was a viable option. Necessity legitimated his own and the nation’s bifurcated position on slavery and equal rights. If American slavery were only a matter of necessity, then the slaveholding republic would remain in principle free, and American exceptionalism would be vindicated.³⁵

While Lincoln placed his hopes in the Founders’ original compromise, time was moving rapidly forward. In 1857 the Dred Scott decision relied on original intent to declare that blacks had not been included in the declaration’s and Constitution’s rights and could never be citizens and that Congress had no power to prevent slavery in the territories. Lincoln disagreed with the decision’s reasoning, but it apparently forced him to try to justify the founding generation as men of principle in the face of their—and his own—compromise with “necessity.” When the fathers declared all men equal in “certain inalienable rights,” they did not mean to confer such rights on all men immediately, he said.

They meant simply to declare the *right*, so that the *enforcement* of it might follow as fast as circumstances should permit. They meant to set up a standard maxim for free society . . . and even though never perfectly attained, constantly approximated, and thereby constantly spreading and deepening its influence, and augmenting the happiness and value of life to all people of all colors everywhere.³⁶

Preserving the anchor of declaration principles in an ideal past while deferring their realization to an ideal future, Lincoln coupled a ringing idealism with the postponement of emancipation. The maxim authorized present action to keep slavery from spreading, but not to overturn the fathers’ compromise. It conferred “no right . . . to enter into the slave States, and interfere with the question of slavery at all,” nor should the North have any “inclination” to do so. Here he differed sharply from the radical advocates of free soil who believed there were constitutionally valid ways to undermine southern slavery and who planned to avail themselves of them. Lincoln, in contrast, in order to maintain the Union, declared allegiance to both the slaveholding republic of the past and the liberal republic of the future.³⁷

It is ironic that Lincoln grounded his progressive maxim in the Founders’ feeble hope for a future end to slavery. If in 1790 the founding generation might hope with some realism that progress would bring an end to slavery, by the 1820s emancipation had become a distant futurity. As John Adams then admitted to Thomas Jefferson, it was a hope left passively to “God . . . and his agents in posterity.” The irony became plainer in 1858, when Lincoln challenged Douglas by provocatively declaring that “a house divided against itself cannot stand,” a declaration that on its face suggested not just free soil, but an attack on

³⁵ For Lincoln on “peace,” see Abraham Lincoln, “Fourth Debate with Stephen A. Douglas, at Charleston,” in *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Basler, III, 181; and Abraham Lincoln, “Address at Cooper Institute, New York City,” Feb. 27, 1860, *ibid.*, 538. On “necessity,” see Lincoln, “Speech at Peoria,” 276. On the founding generation, see Paul Finkelman, *Slavery and the Founders: Race and Liberty in the Age of Jefferson* (Armonk, 1996).

³⁶ Lincoln, “Speech at Springfield,” 406. For the view that Lincoln’s resort to necessity was consistent with adherence to liberal principle and his failure to grant equal rights not “intrinsically unjust,” see Harry V. Jaffa, *Crisis of the House Divided: An Interpretation of the Issues in the Lincoln-Douglas Debates* (New York, 1959), 32–34, 61, 318, 325, 379–86, esp. 379.

³⁷ Abraham Lincoln, “Speech at Chicago,” July 10, 1858, in *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Basler, II, 492. On the radicals’ constitutional program against slavery, see Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men*, 122, 208.

southern slavery. "I believe this government cannot endure, permanently half *slave* and half *free*." When Douglas accused him of demagoguery and pointed out that the Union had in fact endured for eighty-two years half-slave and half-free, Lincoln did not answer that the future would be different from the past. On the contrary, he made it clear that he was saying no more than he had always said, that he wished to place slavery "where the founders of this Government originally placed it." Ever since the founding, "the public mind did rest, all that time, in the belief that slavery was in course of ultimate extinction. That was what gave us the rest that we had through that period of eighty-two years." To speak of eighty-two years of rest from agitation over slavery was a gross exaggeration. Moreover, to discover a course toward the extinction of slavery in the eighty-two years since the founding—the very period when slavery had become ever more entrenched—exposed the contradiction between ideal and reality that Lincoln's nationalism blurred. Only in the providential time of American exceptionalism could the nation have been advancing along that ideal path.³⁸

His timetable for emancipation relied on the same premise. At one point in 1858 he explained that extinction of slavery might take "a hundred years, if it should live so long"; at another, he said that it would be "a hundred years at the least; but that it will occur in the best way for both races in God's own good time, I have no doubt." If that passive stance represented an effort to pander to his racist audience, the more active stance Lincoln took in Chicago in 1859 could equally be attributed to political motive, the desire to shore up his antislavery Republican base against a last-minute take-over by Stephen Douglas:

I suppose [slavery] may long exist, and perhaps the best way for it to come to an end peaceably is for it to exist for a length of time. But I say that the spread and strengthening and perpetuation of it is an entirely different proposition. There we should in every way resist it as a wrong, treating it as a wrong, with the fixed idea that it must and will come to an end.

However one parses Lincoln's mix of political calculation and moral principle, ending slavery either passively or actively would be left to the uncertainties of an extended future. The founding generation's original embrace of progress had frozen slavery into the distant future. Lincoln's "ultimate extinction" was threatened with the same fate. Lincoln is rightfully remembered for his valorization of declaration principles of universal liberty and equality as central to the nation's identity—his signature stamp on the political culture of the era. But the linkage between nation and freedom he enacted in principle cut both ways. As Lincoln interpreted the link during the 1850s, its condemnation of slavery came at the cost of timely emancipation. It made up in eloquent moral principle what it surrendered in reality.³⁹

Lincoln's fervent support of both universal liberty and a particular historical nationality, his attachment to a fixed past and a progressive future, gave him free-soil views that straddled the political spectrum from abolitionist fervor against slavery to conservative Unionism. It is no accident that abolitionists distrusted him, nor that he emerged as the

³⁸ John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, 1821, quoted in Stewart Winger, *Lincoln, Religion, and Romantic Cultural Politics* (DeKalb, 2003), 49–50; Abraham Lincoln, "A House Divided": Speech at Springfield, June 16, 1858, in *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Basler, II, 461–62; Lincoln, "Speech at Chicago," July 10, 1858, 491–92.

³⁹ Lincoln, "First Debate with Stephen A. Douglas, at Ottawa," 18; Lincoln, "Fourth Debate with Stephen A. Douglas, at Charleston," 181; Abraham Lincoln, "Speech at Chicago," March 1, 1859, in *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Basler, III, 370.

Republican candidate for president in 1860 who was most acceptable to all wings of the party.⁴⁰

The victory of the Republican party and the secession of the Deep South states put both the nation and the principles attached to it in danger. Lincoln's response was entirely in keeping with his dual values and chief priority: he vowed to maintain the Union and the principle of ultimate freedom it embodied. Lincoln thus drew a firm line as tentative compromise efforts multiplied: on "the question of extending slavery under the national auspices,—I am inflexible." But he would accommodate the South on "whatever springs of necessity from the fact that the institution is amongst us." Unlike Republican radicals, he was willing to shore up the slave system with a strong fugitive slave law, the continuation of the internal slave trade and of slavery in the District of Columbia, and an irrevocable constitutional amendment guaranteeing slavery in the states where it already existed.⁴¹

When compromise failed and the South did not back down, Lincoln did not blanch at war. He had justified the right of secession under the principle of self-government when Texas seceded from Mexico, but when the United States was to be dismembered, he declared that "in contemplation of universal law, and of the Constitution, the union of these states is perpetual." As early as 1856 he used fighting words to dismiss a warning that his free-soil position would force the South to secede. "If you attempt it," he told the South, "*we won't let you. With the purse and sword, the army and navy and treasury in our hands and at our command, you couldn't do it.*" Secession put the Confederate leaders in the role of tyrants who were forcing the American nation to suicide. Their rebellion must be put down.⁴²

Secession and the war that followed gave over the nation to the North and its free-labor nationalism. If the debate over territorial expansion had raised doubts about the character of the nation, secession aroused primordial anxieties about the existence of the nation as a political, territorial, familial unity. The nation became an object of more passionate attachment and self-conscious reflection. Public discourse linked the nation and the nation-state in new ways to individual consciousness and community identity. The proliferation of familial tropes during secession and war signaled both the aspiration for organic unity and the heightened sense of national belonging. Divine support of the American nation and its world-historical mission gained new prominence as clergy and laymen attributed spiritual meaning to the nation's existence and purposes.⁴³

⁴⁰ On abolitionist distrust of Lincoln, see McPherson, *Struggle for Equality*, 9–28. On Lincoln's position within the Republican party, see Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men*, 131–32, 181–82, 186–225.

⁴¹ Lincoln to William H. Seward, Feb. 1, 1861, in *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Basler, IV, 183; Abraham Lincoln, "Remarks Concerning Concessions to Secession," Jan. 28, 1861, *ibid.*, 175–76.

⁴² Abraham Lincoln, "Speech in United States House of Representatives: The War with Mexico," Jan. 12, 1848, in *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Basler, I, 438; Abraham Lincoln, "First Inaugural Address—Final Text, March 4, 1861," *ibid.*, IV, 262–71, esp. 264; Abraham Lincoln, "Speech at Galena, Illinois," July 23, 1856, *ibid.*, II, 355.

⁴³ Melinda Lawson, *Patriot Fires: Forging a New American Nationalism in the Civil War North* (Lawrence, 2002); Alice Fahs, *The Imagined Civil War: Popular Literature of the North and South, 1861–1865* (Chapel Hill, 2001); Dorothy Ross, "Are We a Nation?: The Conjunction of Nationhood and Race in the United States, 1850–1876," *Modern Intellectual History*, 2 (Nov. 2005), 327–60; James H. Moorhead, *American Apocalypse: Yankee Protestants and the Civil War, 1860–1869* (New Haven, 1978); Adam I. P. Smith, *No Party Now: Politics in the Civil War North* (New York, 2006), 67–84.

Emancipation emerged piecemeal through the war years in the context—and for the purpose—of saving the sanctified nation. In the political debates of the war years, as Adam I. P. Smith has convincingly shown, the nation occupied the moral high ground. If since the 1790s electoral politics had been “on some level . . . always about nationhood—then the Civil War raised the stakes even higher: electoral politics in wartime became more than ever a battle over who constituted the legitimate nation.” As groups across the political spectrum vied for the honor of transcending partial interests in service of the nation, it became clear that “a radical political agenda could only be advanced within the ambit of a nationalist political discourse that rhetorically transcended partisanship.”⁴⁴

The first measures against slavery—the Confiscation Acts and Lincoln’s partial, compensated emancipation proposals—were thus designed to weaken the movement toward secession and to encourage the Confederacy to end the war. Between July and September of 1862, in response to faltering Union armies, Lincoln came to believe that the North could not win on the battlefield unless it brought the Confederacy’s slave population over to the Union side. As war eroded the institution of slavery, the massive defection of slaves to Union lines set the emancipation process in motion. The outcome was still uncertain, however, and required national political action. Lincoln set the political forces in motion by issuing the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863. He carefully framed it as a war measure with its operation limited to the areas in rebellion. For Lincoln and the Northern public whose opinion he carefully watched, emancipation could be justified only to save the nation.⁴⁵

The August before, when he was thinking about such a proclamation and antislavery spokesmen were impatiently urging him forward, Lincoln wrote a public letter to the newspaper editor Horace Greeley to clarify his motives for delay:

My paramount object in this struggle *is* to save the Union, and is *not* either to save or to destroy slavery. 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.⁴⁶

Recent historians who have emphasized only the human rights side of Lincoln’s ethical purpose have been anxious to explain away this statement as mere political maneuver in which Lincoln the shrewd politician was staking out his power to act and shoring up his conservative flank as he moved toward emancipation.⁴⁷ But that account is seriously incomplete. If Lincoln had to convince the public that his preeminent aim was to save the nation, it was because experience had shown him that the great majority of the public valued the nation above liberty for the slaves. Nor was he personally dissembling. He was saying exactly what all his previous statements would lead us to expect. Lincoln surely welcomed the opportunity to strike a blow at the institution of slavery when “necessity”

⁴⁴ Smith, *No Party Now*, 4, 66.

⁴⁵ Neely, *Last Best Hope of Earth*, 106–7; Gienapp, *Abraham Lincoln and Civil War America*, 87–90, 105–6, 110–11; Ira Berlin, “Who Freed the Slaves? Emancipation and Its Meaning,” in *Union and Emancipation: Essays on Politics and Race in the Civil War Era*, ed. David W. Blight and Brooks D. Simpson (Kent, 1997), 105–21; Steven Hahn, *A Nation under Our Feet: Black Political Struggle in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge, Mass., 2003), 82, 89, 102.

⁴⁶ Lincoln to Horace Greeley, Aug. 22, 1862, in *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Basler, V, 388.

⁴⁷ McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 508–10; Striner, *Father Abraham*, 176; Cox, *Lincoln and Black Freedom*, 12; Guelzo, *Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation*, 149–51; Oakes, *Radical and the Republican*, 189.

permitted. But keeping the nation intact had always been his paramount moral concern, toward which freeing the slaves at any time might, or might not, contribute.

Once convinced that emancipation was necessary to save the Union, Lincoln issued the proclamation and resisted efforts to reverse course. The war could now be dedicated to emancipation as well as saving the Union and the nation's exceptionalism vindicated. In the high rhetoric of the Gettysburg Address, Lincoln invested the nation with the universal moral purpose that nationalist ideology had always claimed for it. As Harry V. Jaffa pointed out, "what was called a self-evident truth by Jefferson becomes in Lincoln's rhetoric an inheritance from 'our fathers.' . . . Lincoln transforms a truth open to each man as man into something he shares by virtue of his partnership in the nation." Lincoln made the nation into a moral source of universalist liberal principle and a living center of spiritual force.⁴⁸

Some recent interpreters of Lincoln have been uneasy about this romantic nationalism and tried to absolve him of belief in American exceptionalism. His reading of American exceptionalism certainly lacked the arrogance shown by patriots who unquestioningly claimed that Americans were the chosen people of God and that their own version of national purpose was God's will. Lincoln had begun his career as a fatalist who rejected the need for a deity, but by the 1850s he increasingly ascribed the chain of historical cause and effect to divine Providence. For Lincoln, America's exceptionalism was the product of a providential history in which God's ultimate purposes could not be known; America's vanguard role was part of a worldwide progress of liberal principle whose outcome could not be certain. But that America had a special role to play in the outcome he did not doubt. The story he told about the United States was an exceptionalist one.⁴⁹

As the pressures on him mounted, he called increasingly on Providence and with it on exceptionalist tropes. On his way to Washington during the secession crisis, he humbly placed himself "in the hands of the Almighty, and of this, his almost chosen people." In his first inaugural address, he put the country in the hands of "Him, who has never yet forsaken this favored land." By his second inaugural, he required the Calvinist God of vengeance to account for the terrible war visited on the nation for its sin of slavery. Lincoln, as ever, was circumspect in his claims: note his "almost chosen people," and "never yet forsaken." In the second inaugural he used "*If we shall suppose*" to introduce the proposition that American slavery might be an offense God wished to punish. Exploring the borderlands between history and divine dispensation, Lincoln never claimed fully to know God's will, but he did believe that the nation had been given special responsibility for the principle of liberty. If the American republic failed, free government could perish

⁴⁸ Jaffa, *Crisis of the House Divided*, 227–29. For a discussion of how Lincoln's wartime providentialism legitimated emancipation and exceptionalism, see Guyatt, *Providence and the Invention of the United States*, 259–98. On the rhetorical achievement of the Gettysburg Address, see Garry Wills, *Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words That Remade America* (New York, 1992); but cf. Pauline Maier, *American Scripture: Making the Declaration of Independence* (New York, 1997).

⁴⁹ Lincoln was celebrated in writings of the 1950s and 1960s for his powerful yet humble assertion of America's "civil religion." For a review and critique of that literature, see Melvin B. Endy Jr., "Abraham Lincoln and American Civil Religion: A Reinterpretation," *Church History*, 44 (June 1975), 229–41. For a later analysis of Lincoln's exceptionalism, see Jean H. Baker, "Lincoln's Narrative of American Exceptionalism," in "*We Cannot Escape History*": *Lincoln and the Last Best Hope of Earth*, ed. James M. McPherson (Urbana, 1995), 33–44. For recent works that absolve Lincoln of exceptionalist ideology, see James Kloppenberg, "Aspirational Nationalism in America," *Intellectual History Newsletter* (no. 2, 2002), 64–65; Bender, *Nation among Nations*, 116–81, esp. 124, 176; Winger, *Lincoln, Religion, and Romantic Cultural Politics*, 11, 75–76, 207; and Noll, *America's God*, 422–38. On Lincoln's fatalism and providentialism, see Allen C. Guelzo, *Abraham Lincoln: Redeemer President* (Grand Rapids, 1999), 115–21, 318–28.

forever from the earth. As one historian wryly noted, “One looks in vain for any admission on Lincoln’s part that God might manage without a unified United States.”⁵⁰

After the Emancipation Proclamation, public support for a permanent end to slavery widened in the North. The absence of an exodus of freed slaves to the North, the transformation of runaway slaves into Union laborers, and the bravery of the newly commissioned black soldiers—all eased northern fears and encouraged moral arguments for liberty. For the Republican majority in the North, slavery came into focus as the cause of the war and emancipation as a policy necessary to end it and to prevent future hostilities. The National Union party that formed in 1864 to reelect Lincoln included in its platform the promise to pass a constitutional amendment that forever ended slavery. As Adam I. P. Smith has shown, “The Unionists . . . implicitly transformed emancipation into an aspect of nation-building: slavery must die because it threatened the life of the nation.” Emancipation required the force of nationalist purpose because, for all the growing sentiment for justice to the slave, the nation remained the North’s higher and more widely accepted ideal.⁵¹

With Lincoln’s support, the Congress voted full and permanent emancipation in the Thirteenth Amendment. Much of the congressional debate occurred in the midst of Lincoln’s still doubtful campaign for reelection. While the amendment passed easily in the Senate, the House approved it in a lame-duck session only after his convincing electoral victory. The major reasons urged in support of the amendment—as in the general political discourse of the war years—were directly linked to preserving the nation.⁵² Virtually every supporter in the Senate and most in the House argued that permanent emancipation would speed Union victory, prevent future civil wars, and secure the nation. Nationalism allowed the radical senator Charles Sumner to escape the odium of “philanthropy” by urging passage of the amendment “to save the country from peril . . . to save the national life.” Nationalism likewise allowed a reluctant Kentucky Unionist in the House to accept emancipation: “If I must choose between secession and slavery on the one hand and universal emancipation and nationality on the other, I would embrace and cling to and defend our nationality.”⁵³

When saving the nation necessitated emancipation, the principles of enlightened and Christian humanity could do their work. Although a few defenders of slavery still claimed divine authority for the institution, Lyman Trumbull opened the Senate debate with the disclaimer that “it is now very generally conceded that slavery is not a divine institution.” Most supporters of the amendment went much further, claiming God’s law on their side

⁵⁰ Abraham Lincoln, “Address to the New Jersey State Senate,” Feb. 21, 1861, in *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Basler, IV, 236; Lincoln, “First Inaugural Address,” *ibid.*, 271; Abraham Lincoln, “Second Inaugural Address,” March 4, 1865, *ibid.*, VIII, 332–33; Endy, “Abraham Lincoln and American Civil Religion,” 240.

⁵¹ Smith, *No Party Now*, 141–43.

⁵² My judgment, based on a reading of the congressional debates over the Thirteenth Amendment, is confirmed by that of Rogan Kersh, based on a statistical sample of newspaper opinion and congressional debates concerning all three Reconstruction amendments. See Kersh, *Dreams of a More Perfect Union*, 216–18. Passage of the amendment is attributed to the universalist idealism embedded in American ideology and institutions in Herman Belz, *Emancipation and Equal Rights: Constitutionalism in the Civil War Era* (New York, 1978), xvi–xviii, 30–33. On the amendment as a product of contingent “political tactics, legal thought, and popular ideology,” see Michael Vorenberg, *Final Freedom: The Civil War, the Abolition of Slavery, and the Thirteenth Amendment* (Cambridge, Eng., 2001), 3.

⁵³ Smith, *No Party Now*, 56; Charles Sumner, in *Congressional Globe*, 38 Cong., 1 sess., Feb. 9, 1864, p. 536; George H. Yeaman, *ibid.*, 2 sess., Jan. 9, 1865, p. 170.

and declaring slavery a sin. Virtually all supporters urged emancipation as a matter of right or justice. Reverdy Johnson, a Maryland Unionist, asserted that blacks themselves, by escaping at the first opportunity and flocking to Union camps, had demonstrated “in the very effort the inextinguishable right to liberty.” Many other speakers justified freedom as the deserved reward for the bravery of black soldiers. All three sources of moral conviction—Christianity, justice, and nation—were often linked, as speakers referred to “this great and Christian nation” or declared that “Liberty exalted in this proud capital will exert its proper sway over the whole world and for all time.”⁵⁴

While arguments remained much the same over the course of the full year of debates, one change is noteworthy. During the lame-duck session of the House, most of the Democrats who had opposed the amendment—even if they still opposed it—now proclaimed that they and their party had always thought slavery morally wrong; they gave principled support to states’ rights and national peace, they said, not slavery.⁵⁵ Lincoln’s decisive victory obviously made these partisans anxious to put the Democratic party on the side of the majority of voters. What is noteworthy is that they believed majority opinion now required them to object to slavery on moral grounds. Under the aegis of the nation, the moral revolution against slavery of the mid-eighteenth century had finally come to fruition.

The fulfillment of human rights has had longer to wait. The amendment deliberately abolished slavery rather than explicitly conferring civil or political rights. At the time of passage, Congress and the state ratifying conventions were uncertain how far beyond the right to free labor the new black freedom would extend. Shortly before his death, Lincoln quietly urged the governor of Louisiana to grant black soldiers and “the very intelligent” Negroes the vote. But, anxious to restore the national union and reluctant to tamper with the constitutional framework that held it together, he did so only in private communications and left the decision to the returning states themselves. The war had deepened Lincoln’s egalitarian instincts, but as it had before the war, his nationalism still worked against the full extension of the principle of liberty.⁵⁶

The debates over emancipation to which Lincoln was a party revitalized the declaration principles of human rights and, by planting their roots in law and political culture, kept them alive for later use. Both the doctrine of equal rights that widened modern American democracy and the human rights that helped construct the welfare state had sources in the emancipation effort. Still, many of the freedoms gained in the Reconstruction amendments were soon circumscribed. I have argued that the moral power of allegiance to the nation played a crucial role in both instantiating human rights and limiting them. Concern for the nation had been a critical factor over the long course of emancipation debate. In the antebellum decades, concern for the nation helped stymie abolition. It was

⁵⁴ Lyman Trumbull, in *Congressional Globe*, 38 Cong., 1 sess., March 28, 1864, p. 1314; Reverdy Johnson, *ibid.*, April 5, 1864, p. 1423; Isaac Arnold, *ibid.*, March 19, 1864, p. 1197. See also John Farnsworth, *ibid.*, June 15, 1864, p. 2980; Thomas Jenckes, *ibid.*, 2 sess., Jan. 11, 1865, p. 225; Green Smith, *ibid.*, Jan. 12, 1865, p. 237; Cornelius Cole, *ibid.*, Jan. 28, 1865, p. 482.

⁵⁵ William S. Holman, *ibid.*, 38 Cong., 2 sess., Jan. 11, 1865, p. 218; James A. Cravens, *ibid.*, 219; Samuel S. Cox, *ibid.*, Jan. 12, 1865, p. 242; James S. Rollins, *ibid.*, Jan. 13, 1865, pp. 258–59; Anson Herrick, *ibid.*, Jan. 31, 1865, pp. 525–26; Martin Kalbfleisch, *ibid.*, p. 530.

⁵⁶ Vorenberg, *Final Freedom*, 212–30. On Lincoln’s letter and his last known views on civil rights, see Fredrickson, *Big Enough to Be Inconsistent*, 117–23, esp. 118.

only in the nationalist context inaugurated by the free-soil debate that antislavery principle gained an articulate spokesman in Lincoln, and only in the heightened nationalist context of civil war, when the ideals of nation and human rights were aligned, that emancipation gained Lincoln's and the North's support. Given that reality, it is not surprising that after the war reuniting the nation took precedence over justice for the freedpeople. The preeminent allegiance to the nation that is implied in David Blight's story of reunion was not just a postwar phenomenon but had governed the country's response to slavery since the founding of the Republic.⁵⁷

The emancipation debates—with considerable help from Lincoln—revived and strengthened the exceptionalist ideology that linked universal principles of liberty and equality to the American nation. That tie produced mixed results, for the moral implications of exceptionalism varied, depending on the nationalist context in which it operated. Before the war, exceptionalist rhetoric had likely obscured more often than it revealed the country's dereliction, as it initially did for Lincoln. When sectional conflict forced the nation to face its contradictory identity and the Civil War joined liberty to national survival, however, exceptionalist ideology became a powerful force for emancipation. Still, attachment to the nation left in play the abridgments of universal freedom exacted by the nation's particular existence. Lincoln solved the moral conflict he faced between principled liberty and national survival by linking human rights to national allegiance, but human rights remained the subordinate partner. When the egalitarian sentiments aroused by wartime nationalism receded, Americans were once again tempted to rely on the rhetoric of national freedom rather than the practice. The familial nationalism that emerged from the war encouraged Americans over the next few decades—and well into the twentieth century—to define the nation by race. As powerful a support of liberty and equality as exceptionalist ideology can be, the nationalist core of American identity retains the power to undermine universal principle.

⁵⁷ David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, Mass., 2001). See also Kersh, *Dreams of a More Perfect Union*, 198–241.