

Three books offer differing views about Lincoln, race and slavery

Authors detail president's handling of tough issues

By James R. Carroll

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It is not difficult to find ample contemporaneous accounts showing that, at the start of the American Civil War, many people truly believed the conflict was not about race.

Indeed, there was a man in the White House who publicly expressed that conviction, at least for a time.

But Abraham Lincoln was no fool. He was perhaps America's most politically astute leader. As such, he knew how far ahead he could lead and how far Americans would follow, and freeing millions of slaves from bondage in the South was not a clarion call to war for the vast majority of Northerners. Saving the union was.

But, of course, the war was about race. All of American life had been permeated with the race issue. And that included all of American politics.

In these three books, we have very different treatments of Lincoln's handling of the slavery and race issue, both before and during the Civil War.

In *Lincoln at Peoria: The Turning Point*, Lewis E. Lehrman skillfully and convincingly makes the case that the speech that marked the Kentucky-born Lincoln's re-entry into politics in 1854 after a five-year hiatus also established him as one of slavery's most important opponents.

Lehrman argues that Lincoln's Peoria, Ill., speech on Oct. 16, 1854, "forms the foundation of his politics and principles, in the 1850s and in his presidency."

The address is the dividing line between the early Lincoln and the mature Lincoln, Lehrman contends. And it was the start of Lincoln's intense focus on the slavery issue.

The future president's arguments against the expansion of slavery into new territories and his belief that the American government's power came "from the consent of the governed," including blacks, was neither a common nor a popular stand in 1854.

But Lincoln strove to "get right with the Declaration of Independence," and in that quest exhibited an uncommon leadership that transformed the nation, Lehrman writes.

"Mr. Lincoln defined the essence of the American dream," Lehrman says.

Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s *Lincoln on Race & Slavery* is an ideal companion volume to Lehrman's, as it offers 70 addresses and letters by Lincoln from 1837 to 1865.

With brief commentaries and explanations before each entry, Gates reveals the underlying beliefs of Lincoln and “the progress of his fraught journey through the thickets of slavery and race.”

Lincoln's thoughts and actions were contradictory at times, but Gates makes this fundamental distinction: “All men may have been created equal; the real question was who was a man, and what being ‘a man,’ in fact, meant. Thomas Jefferson most certainly was not thinking of black men and women when he wrote the Declaration of Independence; and no amount of romantic historical wishful thinking can alter that fact. However, Abraham Lincoln most certainly and most impressively did, as he stated privately in 1858 and publicly throughout his career.”

Lincoln's evolution on the questions of slavery and race is plotted as we make our way through his thinking over the decades. “Lincoln remade himself as a proponent of black freedom, fully aware of how far he had come in doing so,” Gates writes.

What, then, do we make of Paul D. Escott's thesis on Lincoln that “reestablishing peace and union with those who had brought the war clearly was more important to him than elevating the status of the freedmen”?

Well, this reviewer was not persuaded, especially given so much other Lincoln scholarship like that of Lehrman and Gates.

“What Shall We Do with the Negro?” Lincoln, White Racism, and Civil War America sets as its goal stripping away “popular culture's gloss” and the “flattering myths” to expose a Civil War era where cynical political calculations dominated, including in Lincoln's White House.

Here we have in full view the schism among Lincoln historians, and Escott is taking on a lot of the biggies with his contrarian view of the Great Emancipator as more like a Great Appeaser of the South. In fact, it is rare to recommend reading an appendix in a book first, but this would be one of those exceptions, for in less than four pages Escott attempts to demolish the work of many Civil War historians and biographers whom he sees as preservers of the Lincoln hagiography.

Squarely among the revisionists, Escott seeks to whittle Lincoln down to size — or smaller — to place him among his contemporaries as merely another political animal who dealt in “subtlety, ambiguity and contingency.”

On how long Lincoln clung to the idea of colonizing blacks in Africa, Escott mentions the tale told years after Lincoln's death by Gen. Benjamin Butler, who wrote in his memoirs that he and the president discussed the matter only days before Lincoln's assassination at Ford's Theatre. The veracity of this conversation has been debated among scholars for decades, and Escott concedes “this conversation may or may not have taken place,” but uses it to reinforce his contention that Lincoln “had very limited expectations for improvements in American race relations.”

What Escott does not mention is that Butler months before his supposed meeting with the president was dismissed from command — at the urging of Gen. Ulysses S.

Grant — by Lincoln. Could Butler have had a reason to diminish Lincoln? You make the call.

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