

Tracing the Roots of Lincoln's Democratic Vision

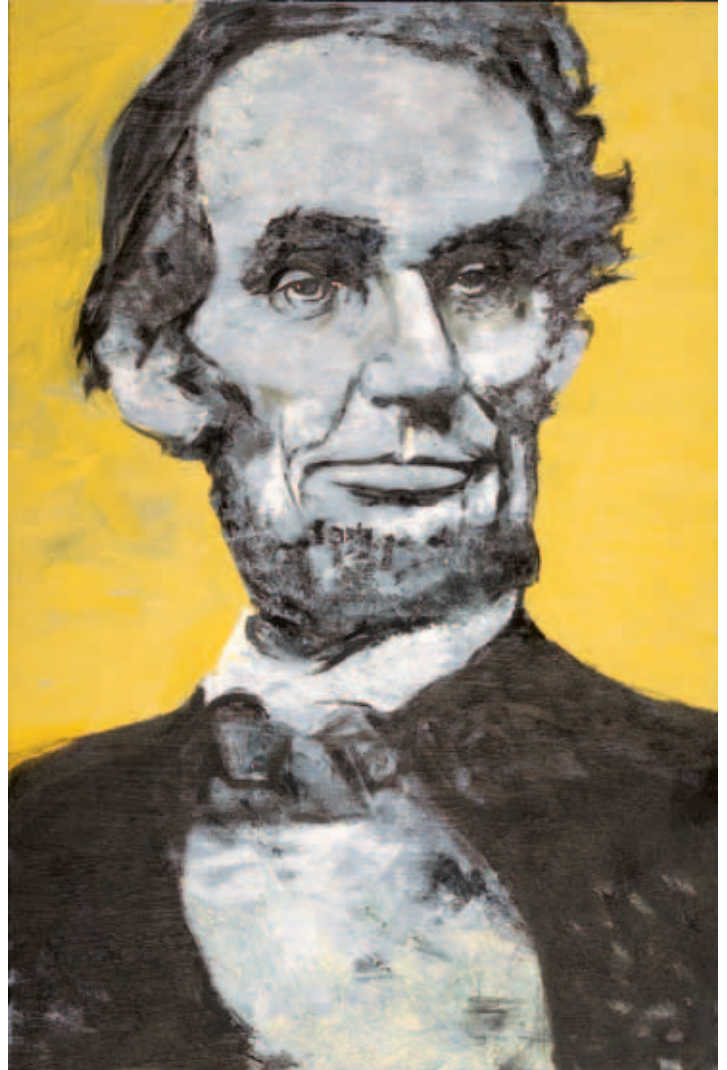
No president looms larger in American memory than Abraham Lincoln. Lincoln permeates nearly every facet of American life. A variety of politicians have been obliged to claim Lincoln's mantle, including Radical Republicans, progressive reformers, and New Deal Democrats. Historians have found ample source material in Lincoln too. As Lincoln scholars are fond of noting, "historians have written more books on Lincoln than any other figure in world history—save Jesus Christ." Similarly, poets, novelists, and artists have found great meaning and inspiration in the face, body, and biography of Lincoln. Finally, the Lincoln image has appeared in a diverse array of films, often as a source of inspiration to the hero struggling against corrupt forces.

Lincoln also dominates the American memorial landscape. Monuments, memorials, busts, and sculptures appear in city parks, state capitols, and town squares around the country. The most famous memorials include Lincoln National Monument (1874) in Springfield, Illinois, Freedman's Memorial (1876), and the Lincoln Memorial (1922), the latter two in Washington, D.C. As national shrines, these memorials have proven very popular with tourists. Since 1922, the Lincoln Memorial has attracted more visitors than any other Washington, D.C. monument. Likewise, in Springfield, the Lincoln National Monument, along with the recently built Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum, are visited every year by thousands of tourists, Lincoln devotees, and school groups. Finally, as yet another kind of monument, Lincoln's words echo in American memory. For generations, schoolchildren have recited the Gettysburg Address as a catechism of their civic faith. The monumental Lincoln stands second to none in American life.

In a less sacred sense, Lincoln also seems omnipresent in everyday America. His visage appears in television commercials, weekly magazines, and on U.S. currency. His name designates streets, schools, towns, banks, cities, cars, and companies in nearly every corner of the country. Even in ordinary life, Americans cannot get enough of Lincoln.

As all these examples suggest, Lincoln has captivated Americans for generations. But why? Several historians have studied the formation and cultivation of a Lincoln myth. In *The Real American Dream: A Meditation on Hope* (1999), Andrew Delbanco explains that Lincoln "became the key symbol of the idea of universal rights and the most eloquent witness to the tragedy of its betrayal, and thereby established himself at the center of our national story" (1). In *Lincoln in American Memory* (1994), Merrill Peterson identifies several important Lincoln myths: Savior of the Union, Great Emancipator, Self-Made Man, and First American. As Peterson argues, the rise (and sometimes fall) of these myths made them far from unchanging and universal (2). In fact, Americans have always interpreted and reinterpreted the meaning of Lincoln's life and legacy. But despite the changing meaning, Americans' desire to understand Lincoln has remained constant. This phenomenon is premised on the recurring belief that understanding Lincoln is the key to understanding America (3).

But before historians, teachers, and students can understand the enduring power of the Lincoln myth, they must first understand the foundation on which these myths were built. That is, we must examine what Lincoln thought of the union, emancipation, democracy, and the



Lincoln 95 (Oil on canvas, copyright Wendy Allen, 2004.)

American dream. This essay explores Lincoln's thoughts on these topics and the disagreements among historians over the meaning of these views. (4)

Savior of the Union

America's foremost national monument to Lincoln identifies him preeminently as the savior of the Union. The inscription inside the Lincoln Memorial reads,

In this Temple
As In The Hearts Of The People
For Whom He Saved the Union
The Memory of Abraham Lincoln
Is Enshrined Forever



“A Job for the New Cabinet Maker.” Recently elected, Lincoln uses “Union Glue” to repair a cabinet split into “North” and “South,” 1861. (Image courtesy of Library of Congress, LC-USZ62-48217.)

Throughout American history, the images of Washington and Lincoln have been paired as the respective founder and savior of the American experiment. Today many Americans take their country’s existence for granted. But the American nation was in fact the product of political struggle and terrible violence. In the mid-nineteenth century, the preservation of the union required a civil war that claimed the lives of over 600,000 people. In 1860-1861, before a shot had even been fired, seven states seceded from the union and formed the Confederate States of America. In Lincoln’s first inaugural address, he made clear that he viewed secession as unconstitutional and the union as perpetual. “Plainly, the central idea of secession is the essence of anarchy,” he explained. “A majority, held in restraint by constitutional checks and limitations, and always changing easily with deliberate changes of popular opinions and sentiments is the only true sovereign of a free people. Whoever rejects it, does, of necessity, fly to anarchy or to despotism” (5). Lincoln’s determination was crucial to his success in preserving the union (6).

Unlike President James Buchanan who argued that the federal government could not stop the dissolution of the Union, Lincoln made a much broader interpretation of the presidential powers granted him by

the U.S. Constitution. He viewed the civil war as a test that would determine the fate of popular government around the globe. Lincoln stated: “Our popular government has often been called an experiment. Two points in it our people have already settled—the successful *establishing* and the successful *administering* of it. One still remains—its successful *maintenance* against a formidable internal attempt to overthrow it. It is now for them to demonstrate to the world that those who can fairly carry an election can also suppress a rebellion; that ballots are the rightful and peaceful successors of bullets; and that when ballots have fairly and constitutionally decided, there can be no successful appeal except to ballots themselves, at succeeding elections” (7).

For Lincoln, preserving the union meant more than preserving the territorial integrity of the nation. It also meant preserving the idea upon which, he believed, the nation was based: the equality of all human beings and freedom of opportunity. Like Daniel Webster, his Whig predecessor, Lincoln saw liberty and union as inseparable. Preserving the union meant preserving the principles for which it stood. These principles were enshrined in the Declaration of Independence and its equality clause, which Lincoln regarded as “the central idea” of the regime and “the father of all moral principle” (8). Lincoln believed that liberty and equality, as promised by the American experiment, were best safeguarded and perpetuated under the auspices of a nation committed to the rule of law in the Constitution and the moral ideals of the Declaration. In 1861, Lincoln affirmed the moral importance of the union at Independence Hall in Philadelphia. Defying assassination, he ironically proclaimed that “if this country cannot be saved without giving up that principle [embodied in the Declaration] . . . I would rather be assassinated on this spot than surrender it” (9). Four years later, he would be martyred for this very cause.

Not all historians have accepted Lincoln’s conception of the union as consistent with the authentic view of the Founding or as an improvement over it. Many of these critics come from the states-rights tradition of John C. Calhoun. For example, Wilmoore Kendall, George Carey, and M.E. Bradford claim that by giving the Declaration of Independence constitutional status, Lincoln imposed a radical egalitarian conception of equality upon the union that destroyed limited and local government in the name of an abstract, unrealizable ideal that requires an unconstitutional increase of federal intervention. In “Equality: Commitment or Ideal,” Kendall concludes: “The Declaration of Independence does not commit us to equality as a national goal—for more reasons than you can shake a stick at” (10). As these critics illustrate, Americans continue to debate Lincoln’s status as Savior of the Union.

Great Emancipator

In 1876, the African American community dedicated the Freedman’s Monument to Lincoln in Washington, D.C. They paid tribute to a man they called “an American Moses.” The monument was the brainchild of an emancipated slave, Charlotte Scott. After hearing of Lincoln’s assassination, Scott said to her employer, “The colored people have lost their best friend on earth. Mr. Lincoln was our best friend, and I will give five dollars of my wages towards erecting a monument to his memory” (11). Frederick Douglass spoke on the occasion. While praising Lincoln, he conveyed ambivalence about Lincoln’s legacy as the Great Emancipator that is still debated today. “He was preeminently the white man’s President,” said Douglass, “entirely devoted to the welfare of white men. . . . The race to which we belong were not the special objects of his consideration. . . . You [my white fellow citizens] are the children of Abraham Lincoln. We are at best only his stepchildren” (12). Yet on other occasions Douglass referred to Lincoln as “the greatest statesman that ever presided over the destinies of this Republic” and “one of the very few Americans, who could entertain a negro and converse with him without in anywise reminding him of the unpopularity of his color” (13).



“Emancipation.” In his celebration of emancipation, Thomas Nast envisions an optimistic future for free blacks in the United States. The central scene shows the interior of a freedman’s home with the family gathered around a “Union” wood stove. The father bounces his small child on his knee while his wife and others look on, c. 1865. (Image courtesy of Library of Congress, LC-USZ62-2573.)

Echoing Douglass’s ambivalence, historians have debated Lincoln’s status as the Great Emancipator. On one side, Richard Hofstadter and Lerone Bennett, Jr. sought to debunk this status. Hofstadter described the Emancipation Proclamation as having “all the moral grandeur of a bill of lading,” while Bennett called it a fraud. On the other side, recent scholars have attempted to rehabilitate Lincoln’s image as the Great Emancipator (14). Indeed, they argue that Lincoln believed that the fate of American democracy depended upon the freedom of the slave. In speaking of “a new birth of freedom” at Gettysburg, he pointed to the possibility of a nation cleansed of the original sin of slavery, thereby asking his fellow countrymen to support the Emancipation Proclamation, which took effect in 1863. Lincoln viewed the Emancipation Proclamation as a defining moment within the arc of human history: “Fellow-citizens, we cannot escape history. We of this Congress and this administration, will be remembered in spite of ourselves. No personal significance, or insignificance, can spare one or another of us. The fiery trial through which we pass, will light us down, in honor or dishonor, to the latest generation. We say we are for the Union. The world will not forget that we say this. We know how to save the Union. The world knows we do know how to save it. We—even we here—hold the power, and bear the responsibility. In giving freedom to the *slave*, we assure freedom to the *free*—hon-

orable alike in what we give, and what we preserve. We shall nobly save, or meanly lose, the last best, hope of earth” (15).

Democratic Sage

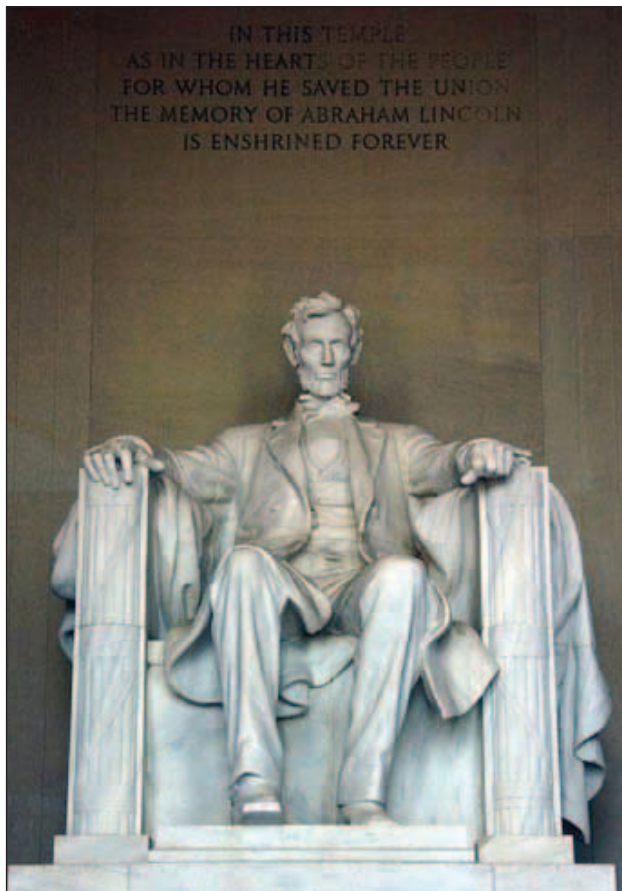
Since his death in 1865, many Americans have looked on Lincoln as a teacher who instructs them about the importance of democracy. As a person who put democracy into practice, Lincoln’s words have proved especially important. His eloquent language has provided Americans with some of the more powerful articulations of democratic government: “As I would not be a *slave*, so I would not be a *master*. This expresses my idea of democracy. Whatever differs from this, to the extent of the difference, is no democracy” (16). In the view of political philosopher Harry V. Jaffa, Lincoln’s reflections on democracy had deep historical roots. The Civil War, according to Jaffa, was a war over ideas and between right and wrong, dating back to the perennial struggle between Socrates the philosopher and Gorgias the sophist in ancient Greece. Jaffa states, “Lincoln, as president and commander in chief, must save the union from physical destruction. But first he must save it from ingenious sophistry [of proslavery thinkers like John C. Calhoun]. The salvation of the union depends, first and foremost, upon the defeat of the Unjust Speech by the Just Speech, or the victory of philosophy over sophistry. Lincoln is perhaps the greatest of all exemplars of So-

cratic statesmanship” (17). Illustrating Jaffa’s point, Lincoln viewed slavery and democracy as fundamentally incompatible ideas. In his famous “A House Divided” speech, Lincoln emphasized that these two principles could not co-exist. Lincoln declared, “A house divided against itself cannot stand. I believe this government cannot endure, permanently half *slave* and half *free*” (18). In articulating this incompatibility, Lincoln helped make America a more democratic nation.

Lincoln, however, was no blind ideologue. He could be a harsh critic of democracy’s excesses too. Slavery, mob rule, nativism, and imperialism were all forms of democratic tyranny that undermined the moral credibility of the nation. Despite the Mexican War’s popularity, as a U.S. Congressman (1846-1848), Lincoln opposed the war because of its imperialistic design. This position provided inspiration to future Americans. For instance, in 1899, the Anti-Imperialist League cited Lincoln’s opposition to the Mexican War to legitimate its opposition to American involvement in the Philippines, also a popular war. In addition to illustrating Lincoln’s enduring influence, the Philippines case demonstrates the limits of democracy. In short, Lincoln’s nuanced understanding of democracy continued to influence Americans well beyond 1865.

Because Lincoln understood both the strengths and the weaknesses of democracy, he was able to navigate the fundamental tensions implicit in it. Among these tensions is the continuous effort to balance the important goods of liberty and security, especially in wartime. Lincoln posed the question in these terms: “Is there, in all republics, this inherent and fatal weakness? Must a Government, of necessity, be too strong for the liberties of its own people, or too weak to maintain its own existence?” (19). Though mindful of this tension, Lincoln nonetheless undertook extraordinary measures to suppress the rebellion, suspending the writ of habeas corpus and establishing military commissions to try civilians. Some wondered whether the Constitution would survive Lincoln’s effort to save it (20). Was it possible to bend the Constitution without breaking it? (21). Throughout the current “war on terror,” the argument continues about the proper use of executive power. Historians and politicians on both sides of the issue cite Lincoln to illustrate either a cautionary tale or the perfect balance of executive power.

Lincoln not only articulated one of the most compelling theoretical justifications of democracy, he also put the principle into practice. With consummate political skill, Lincoln read public opinion and managed factions within his cabinet, the federal government, and American society. He thereby helped to narrow the gap between principle and practice in American democracy. This feat was accomplished through the virtue of prudence—the ability to apply principle under the circumstances for the common good of the nation as a whole, as when he extended equality through the Emancipation while taking into consideration its legality as a war measure and its impact upon the border states.



At its dedication in 1922, Chief Justice William Howard Taft called the Lincoln Memorial a “shrine of democracy,” a tribute to Lincoln’s call for a government of the people, by the people, and for the people. (Image courtesy of Library of Congress, LC-USE6-D-001388.)

Embodiment of the American Dream

In *Lincoln and the Economics of the American Dream*, historian Gabor S. Boritt explains the relationship between Lincoln’s political and economic views, his defense of “the right to rise,” and his characterization of the Civil War as a war for the American Dream: “It had all begun long ago with a poor boy’s conviction...that a man should receive the whole fruit of his labor so that he might get ahead in life. The boy became a man and a politician, and worked through the better part of his life to the end that government might always be dedicated to that proposition. Both politics and political economy were moral enterprises for him, and so his goal, which we call the American Dream, was a moral goal . . . The role Lincoln gave to man’s right to rise through the reward of labor was in no small part of his own making. And as he reminisced on the threshold of the presidency, his faith in that central role had become unshakable. The United States had to be saved *with* that Dream. ‘If this country cannot be saved without giving up that principle,’ he declared, ‘I would rather be assassinated’” (22).

One of Lincoln’s most memorable expressions of the American Dream was delivered impromptu to an Ohio regiment in 1864: “I happen temporarily to occupy this big White House. I am a living witness that any one of your children may look to come here as my father’s child has. It is in order that each of you may have through this free government which we have enjoyed, an open field and a fair chance for your industry, enterprise and intelligence; that you may all have equal privileges in the race of life, with all its desirable human aspirations. It is for this the struggle should be maintained, that we may not lose our birthright—not only for one, but for two or three years. The nation is worth fighting for, to secure such an inestimable jewel” (23). Lincoln is the embodiment of the self-made man who began as a “poor-penniless beginner in the race of life” and through his own hard work and initiative became president. He is the American success story writ large. It is this vision of the American Dream, a dream of equality of opportunity whereby people are rewarded on the basis of their ability rather than their race, creed, religion, gender or color that has attracted so many immigrants to America’s shores in search of a better life.

Lincoln’s log cabin origins, his fame as the rail-splitter, his homespun speech, his folksy humor and manners, and his ability to relate to the common man have all contributed to his image as the First American, the quintessential democrat. This view of Lincoln as an everyman was further popularized and immortalized in the poetry of Walt Whitman and Carl Sandburg. An anonymous Sonnet from 1937 written in the dark days of the Depression perhaps says it best in terms of how we see in Lincoln both a hero and a man of the people:



This drawing entitled, "Log cabin built by Lincoln in Kentucky" appeared in the *Frank Leslie's Illustrated News* in 1865. Popular periodicals helped establish Lincoln's mythic log cabin origins. The myth led many Americans in the decades following the Civil War to view the president as the embodiment of the American Dream. (Image courtesy of Library of Congress, LC-USZ62-6951.)

Lincoln, thou shouldst be living at this hour
 Son of the soul, brother of poverty
 Those hard sharers of great destiny;
 Exemplar of humility and power,
 Walking alone to meet thy waiting fate
 Whose shadow was reflected on thy brow,
 Lincoln, thy people invoke thy spirit now—
 Preserve, protect, defend our sovereign state!
 Lover of justice and the common good,
 Despiser of lies, from thy yonder solitude
 Consider the land of thine and freedom's birth—
 Cry out: It shall not perish from the earth!
 Engrave upon our hearts that holy vow.
 Spirit of Lincoln, thy country needs thee now (24).

Conclusion

The four traditional images of Lincoln outlined above are by no means uncontested. There has always been an anti-Lincoln crosscurrent in American history that views him as a villain and seeks to debunk the celebratory view of him. Indeed, there has been an ongoing debate since the Civil War over the meaning of the real Lincoln. Recently, Thomas DiLorenzo, libertarian economist, stigmatizes him as "the Great Centralizer" who paved the way for the bureaucratic welfare state (25). In *Forced into Glory* (2000), Lerone Bennett Jr. seeks to expose Lincoln as a racist and credits the radical abolitionists as the true heroes of the Civil War: "In what some call a hoax and others call a ploy not to free African Americans but to keep them in slavery, Lincoln deliberately drafted the Emancipation Proclamation so that it wouldn't free a single slave immediately. . . . A growing body of evidence sug-

gests that Lincoln's Proclamation was a tactical move designed not to emancipate the slaves but to keep as many slaves as possible in slavery until Lincoln could mobilize support for his conservative plan to free Blacks gradually and to ship them out of the country" (26). Other critics such as Wilmoore Kendall and M.E. Bradford claim that Lincoln derailed the constitution and destroyed states rights by imposing a radical egalitarianism upon the American system that the Founders never envisioned (27). And, most recently, Libertarian presidential candidate Ron Paul repeated "the needless war" thesis that blames Lincoln for a national calamity that could have been avoided (28).

Despite their criticism, these critics illustrate that coming to terms with Lincoln is an important part of understanding the meaning of America. This essay may be seen as an invitation for historians, teachers, and students of American history to rediscover Lincoln and appreciate his influence on the development of American democracy (29). What Secretary of War Stanton said upon hearing of Lincoln's death was truly prescient: "Now he belongs to the ages." □

Endnotes

1. Andrew Delbanco, *The Real American Dream: A Meditation on Hope* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 1, 80.
2. Merrill D. Peterson, *Lincoln in American Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 26-35.
3. Harold Holzer, *Lincoln Seen and Heard* (Lawrence: The University Press of Kansas, 2000).
4. Coeditor Kenneth L. Deutsch and I have attempted to remain faithful to this dialectical approach in our book *Lincoln's American Dream: Clashing Political Perspectives*, which provides critical engagements and appreciations of Lincoln's legacy. Kenneth L. Deutsch and Joseph R. Fornieri, eds., *Lincoln's American Dream: Clashing Political Perspectives* (Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, 2005).
5. Roy P. Basler, ed., *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 8 vols. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1953-55) [Hereinafter cited as *Collected Works*].
6. William Lee Miller, *President Lincoln: The Duty of a Statesman* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008).
7. *Collected Works*, 4:439.
8. *Collected Works*, 2: 383-85, 499. Harry V. Jaffa, *Crisis of the House Divided: An Interpretation of the Issues in the Lincoln Douglas Debates* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1959); Harry V. Jaffa, *A New Birth of Freedom* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000); Joseph R. Fornieri, *Abraham Lincoln's Political Faith* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2003).
9. *Collected Works*, 4: 240-41.
10. Wilmoore Kendall, "Equality: Commitment or Ideal," quoted in *Lincoln's American Dream: Clashing Political Perspectives*, 60-71.
11. Peterson, *Lincoln in American Memory*, 56.
12. Philip S. Foner ed., *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999), 618.
13. James Oakes does a marvelous job of exploring the complex and fascinating relationship between these two men in *The Radical and the Republican: Frederick Douglass, Abraham Lincoln, and the Triumph of Antislavery Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007), 259, 285.
14. Allen C. Guelzo, *Lincoln's Emancipation: The End of Slavery in America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004); LaWanda Cox, *Lincoln and Black Freedom: A Study in Presidential Leadership*, 2nd ed. (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1990); Brian R. Dirck, ed., *Lincoln Emancipated: The President and the Politics of Race* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2003); Harold Holzer, Edna Greene Medford, and Frank J. Williams, *The Emancipation Proclamation: Three Views* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007).
15. *Collected Works*, 5:537, emphasis in the original.
16. *Collected Works*, 2:532.
17. Harry V. Jaffa, *A New Birth of Freedom* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), 368.
18. Beginning with his *Peoria Address of 1854*, which has recently been given its due place in the Lincoln canon by Lewis E. Lehrman, Lincoln emphasized the incompatibility between slavery and the moral meaning of the Union dedicated to the democratic principles of equality and consent in the

- Declaration. See Lewis E. Lehrman, *Lincoln At Peoria: The Turning Point* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2008).
19. *Collected Works*, 4:426.
 20. Mark E. Neely, Jr., *The Fate of Liberty* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).
 21. Frank J. Williams, "Abraham Lincoln and Civil Liberties: Then and Now," in *Lincoln Revisited*, eds. John Y. Simon, Harold Holzer, and Dawn Vogel (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 251-78.
 22. Gabor S. Boritt, *Lincoln and the Economics of the American Dream* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 178, 284-86.
 23. *Collected Works*, 7:512.
 24. Peterson, *Lincoln in American Memory*, 315.
 25. Thomas J. DiLorenzo, *The Real Lincoln: A New Look at Abraham Lincoln, His Agenda, and an Unnecessary War* (Roseville: Forum/Prima Publishing, 2002).
 26. Lerone Bennett, Jr., *Forced into Glory: Abraham Lincoln's White Dream* (Chicago: J.P. Johnson Publishers, 2000), 7-10.
 27. Wilmoore Kendall and George Carey, *Basic Symbols of the American Political Tradition* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University Press, 1995), 75-95.
 28. Ron Paul on *Meet the Press*, December 23, 2007: <http://www.onthessues.org/Archive/2007_Meet_the_Press_Ron_Paul.htm>.
 29. See Deutsch and Fornieri, eds., *Lincoln's American Dream: Clashing Political Perspectives*.

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