

Lincoln and Colonization: Policy or Propaganda?

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Either/or propositions are almost always misleading, at best, in describing historical events. Historical explanations ought to be more subtle and complex than *or*, especially in dealing with the nuances of political rhetoric where multiple meanings are inescapable. Every politician-statesperson knows that what he says in public—and even in private—will be seen as having a propaganda motive. Voters know that political leaders don't just speak to tell voters what's on their minds. They speak to persuade as well as to explain. When and where does the message change from being what it seems—a report on some policy that the leader obviously wants support for—to an effort to shape the public mind? Historians have had considerable trouble in drawing that line with Abraham Lincoln, and they have usually done so by taking either/or positions. One of the most significant examples of that problem arises in his December 1, 1862, Second Annual Message to Congress, discussing colonization.

One school of thought—actually one school with two faces—sees Lincoln's advocacy of colonization as direct and honest: He wanted blacks to leave the country and tried to talk them into doing so. The view was especially popular when Lincoln's love of the Union was the focus while his emancipation instincts were minimized. Writing in 1945, James G. Randall saw colonization as Lincoln's solution to many problems of race relations. That solution, Randall implied, was a good idea.¹

Recent writers have agreed that Lincoln was straightforward in his advocacy. But this time it is certainly not a good thing. Mark E. Neely Jr. calls colonization "a profoundly racist movement" that offered "an all white country in the future." Neely notes that Lincoln abandoned the idea in 1863. Lerone Bennett in *Forced Into Glory*

1. See J. G. Randall, *Lincoln the President: Springfield to Gettysburg*, 2 vols. (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1945), 2:137 ff.

takes that idea and escalates it to emphasize and excoriate “racist” Lincoln and his plan. Eric Foner has been afflicted by Bennett’s view. In a *New York Times* review of William Miller’s *Lincoln’s Virtues*, Foner says, “Lincoln’s support of a policy that might be called the *ethnic cleansing* of America was no transitory fancy.” Thus a modern view adopted by one of the most respected Lincoln scholars and shared by two strange bedfellows (a widely respected prize-winning historian and an editor of a popular magazine with next to no training in history) condemns the president for his racism as manifested in his colonizing plans.²

The other school on colonization agrees that it was not a good thing, but clears Lincoln of racial bias by seeing the idea as a propaganda tool. When racist Democrats yelled “miscegenation,” Lincoln and the Republicans used colonization as political cover. In debates with Douglas, Lincoln had to respond to the Little Giant’s racism (calling blacks “crocodiles,” for example) with some option that would defuse it. As president, Lincoln used colonization as a smokescreen for advancing equality. “Every time [Lincoln] contemplated some new antislavery move,” says Stephen Oates, “he made a great fuss about colonization.” But he and his party knew that colonization was a logistical impossibility. As one Republican politician wrote privately, “Colonization is a damned humbug but it will take with the people.”³

Recent historiography continues the debate. Articles by George Fredrickson and Don Fehrenbacher show the division well. Fredrickson argues that colonization was Lincoln’s policy even though the president believed in the humanity of African Americans. Fehrenbacher sees colonization as “part of the process of conditioning the public mind for the day of jubilee.” Most recently Michael Vorenberg agrees that politics, more than principle, motivated Lin-

2. Neely, *The Abraham Lincoln Encyclopedia* (New York: DeCapo, 1982), 63; Bennett, *Forced Into Glory: Abraham Lincoln’s White Dream* (Chicago: Johnson Publishing, 2000); Foner, “The Education of Abraham Lincoln,” *New York Times*, Book Review Section, February 10, 2002. Foner is not quoting Bennett or even paraphrasing him.

3. Douglas quoted in V. Jacques Voegeli, *Free But Not Equal: The Midwest and the Negro during the Civil War* (Chicago, 1967), 45; Peter J. Parish, *The American Civil War* (New York: Holmes & Meier), 240–42. Oates’s comment is in *Abraham Lincoln: The Man behind the Myths* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), 101. Oates does argue that Lincoln retained a belief in colonization as part of a “salubrious” emancipation process.

4. Fehrenbacher, “Only His Stepchildren: Lincoln and the Negro,” *Civil War His-*

coln.⁴

So we see the issue between on one hand, propaganda: Lincoln didn't really support colonization but used it to take the pressure off his egalitarian goals and policy, and on the other hand, policy: the president advocated colonization and honestly believed in it. The gap between the two is not as stark as the dichotomy suggests, but there is a difference, and it is evident in Lincoln's solution to the problem of slavery in the nation at war as seen in his Second Annual Message.

Exactly one month before the Emancipation Proclamation was to go into effect, December 1, 1862, Lincoln sent his Second Annual Message to Congress.⁵ The message itself began with routine reports from cabinet officers, and then Lincoln picked up the baton. He began with an elegant description of why the Union had to be united, quoting paragraphs from his First Inaugural, and then showing how the nation was united physically and economically. Only the ideas of the time divided the nation, he implied, and they might be changed in a generation. Then he turned to the question of slavery in the nation. He proposed a plan for gradual, compensated emancipation with colonization, and demonstrated how his plan would be far less costly fiscally than the estimated cost of the war. To that end he proposed three constitutional amendments. Then he turned to the question of how African Americans could fit into a free society. This was essentially an argument that blacks, even those not colonized, would not threaten white society once slavery ended. Blacks would stay in the South, which was made

tory 20 (1974): 293–310; Frederickson, "A Man But Not a Brother: Abraham Lincoln and Racial Equality," *Journal of Southern History* 40 (1975): 39–58. Michael Vorenberg, "Abraham Lincoln and the Politics of Black Colonization," *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association* 14 (Summer 1993):23–45. See also James McPherson's best-seller, *Battle Cry of Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 508: "[Lincoln] believed that support for colonization was the best way to defuse much of the anti-emancipation sentiment that might otherwise sink the Republicans in the 1862 elections."

5. The month between the message and the execution of the final Emancipation Proclamation needs clarification. With the clock ticking on the final proclamation could any southern state have time to comply with Lincoln's suggestion? Although I have argued that they could, I think I must retract that. The one example that Lincoln had was West Virginia, which between May and December had become a new state without slavery. But that was a process of several months, not one. No Deep South state had shown any indication that it would end slavery in any fashion and/or rejoin the Union. See my *Presidency of Abraham Lincoln* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1994), 161–62.

6. "Second Annual Message," Roy P. Basler et al., eds., *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 9 vols. (New Brunswick, N. J.: Rutgers University Press, 1953–1955),

congenial by climate, familiarity, and their longtime commitment of their labor. They would not take white jobs; if they stayed where they were, they would, said Lincoln, “jostle no white laborers; if they leave their old places, they leave them open to white laborers.” And even if they moved into new places, surely their numbers were so small compared to the white population that no white person would be threatened.⁶

The president then concluded with one of the most elegant statements in the Lincoln literature, a statement that has been quoted frequently to show Lincoln’s passionate devotion to the Union and liberty—sometimes to one, sometimes the other, and occasionally both: “Fellow citizens we cannot escape history. We of this Congress and this administration, will be remembered in spite of ourselves. . . . 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 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*—honorable alike in what we give and what we preserve. We shall nobly save, or meanly lose, the last best, hope of earth. Other means may succeed; this could not fail. The way is plain, peaceful, generous, just—a way which, if followed, the world will forever applaud, and God must forever bless.”⁷

The plan that Lincoln was pleading for was not the emancipation proclamation, nor a plan to arm the slaves to fight for their own freedom and the Union. It was a passionate defense of the three constitutional amendments that Lincoln proposed to the Congress. Together they were Lincoln’s plan for gradual, compensated emancipation with colonization.

The first amendment offered compensation to every slave state that would abolish slavery by “the year of our Lord one thousand and nine hundred” (thirty-eight years, more than a generation). The government would pay the states in interest-bearing bonds for every slave freed at the time he or she was freed. But, if any state reintroduced slavery, it would have to refund the bonds and the interest to the federal government.⁸ The second amendment compensated the *loyal* owners of slaves who had gained freedom “by

5:527ff.

7. *Ibid.*, 537

8. *Ibid.* 530. See comment in *Daily Illinois State Register*, July 15, 1862.

9. Parish, *American Civil War*, 240–42; Lawanda Cox, *Lincoln and Black Freedom* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1975), 9–11; James McPherson, *Battle*

the chances of war.” This offered repayment for the loss of property when slaves freed themselves by escaping to Union lines. The third amendment said that “Congress may appropriate money and otherwise provide, for colonizing free colored persons, with their own consent, at any place or places without the United States.”

To modern eyes the contrast between Lincoln’s eloquence and the three proposed amendments is stark. The amendments include the possibility, even the likelihood, that some states would keep slavery for more than a generation. More surprising still is the possibility that states might renege on emancipation if they were willing to return the compensation they had been given. Furthermore, the idea of compensation seemed to many people at the time to concede the premises of slavery—slaves were pieces of property. Then there was the colonization proposal, which most blacks (though not all—remember Martin Delany, Henry Highland Garnet, and one of Frederick Douglass’ sons) rejected as endorsing the racist idea that they could not live beside whites but that, even after making southern lands productive, they would have to leave the land of their birth. And yet Lincoln spoke of “giving freedom to the slave, assuring freedom to the free.”

Historians seem confused by the mixed message. Peter Parish writes the whole thing off as propaganda. He argues that Lincoln could not have been serious about these conservative amendments because he declared later in the address that blacks were in such a minority in this country that they could not replace or endanger white men in the workforce or anywhere else. James McPherson admits that the message is ambiguous, yet sees in the stirring peroration evidence that Lincoln’s true goal was “a peace measure to *abolish the institution* everywhere.” Lawanda Cox calls the defense of the proposed amendments “unpersuasive” and hangs on the golden coda to insist that ending slavery was Lincoln’s goal.⁹ David Donald presents a more complex picture, but in the end he joins the group that sees Lincoln’s actions as politics more than policy. The president, Donald notes, had to move more to the center after the election defeats of 1862, and he thought that some of the rebel states or parts of them might return by January first. Parts of Tennessee, Arkansas, the Norfolk region of Virginia, and especially Louisiana would possibly return to the fold. The president was also worried,

Cry of Freedom, 562–63.

10. Donald, *Lincoln* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 395–98.

11. Zarefsky, “Lincoln’s 1862 Annual Message: A Paradigm of Rhetorical Leader-

Donald says, that the Emancipation Proclamation might not be effective. Perhaps a bribe as well as a threat might end slavery and with it the main source of secessionist inspiration and war making.¹⁰

David Zarefsky makes a more complex argument. These apparent contrasts are an imperative part of Lincoln's "paradigm of rhetorical leadership." Zarefsky sees the Second Annual Message as the "best case of rhetorical leadership in the corpus of Lincoln's writings." He argues that presidents produce change by recognizing old paradigms but then by integrating change within them. New wine needs to come in old bottles. The best presidents fashion a way to move to new visions by defining opportunities that existing conditions permit. As Zarefsky says, "Presidents lead by giving voice to a view of the world that offers audiences different and better ways of seeing their own situation."¹¹

How did Lincoln's message to Congress do that? Lincoln, says Zarefsky, makes "four significant rhetorical moves" in the passage on slavery. First the president advocates compensated emancipation and colonization. Second, however, Lincoln "subtly undercuts this advocacy" by suggesting that colonization was impractical. Then he "creates an opening" to defend emancipation by showing that opposition to it is without foundation." This is where Zarefsky points to Lincoln's argument that blacks pose no threat to white society. Fourth, Lincoln provides a "multivocal conclusion" which "in context defends his amendments," but it can also "be read and remembered instead as referring to emancipation." Thus Lincoln was subtly pushing new ideas of emancipation and equality even while on the surface advocating policy that recognized conservative prejudices. Here is propaganda that hides its true liberal goal of emancipation beneath a façade of conservatism.¹² But this argument seems flawed because Zarefsky, imaginative though he is, writes from within the ideological emphasis of his own age. He seems to desire and thus perceive a Lincoln for our time. Like many other writers, he seems unable to believe that Lincoln advocates a process that appalls us today. Colonization must be a hoax and gradual emancipation a deception. Lincoln must be up to something, actually being opposed to the very proposals he advances,

ship," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 3 (Spring 2000): 5–6.

12. *Ibid.*, 7.

13. Tyler Dennett, ed., *Lincoln and the Civil War in the Diaries and Letters of John Hay* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1939), 66–67.

using them to bring the nation to a new birth of freedom. The true thing—Lincoln’s true, but hidden, message—is “Freedom Now!”

But colonization correctly understood isn’t quite the horror that many have made it. Gradual emancipation considered within the context of Lincoln’s devotion to “the whole country [being] our soil” may have something in its favor. Compensation might enlist imperative supporters of the cause of emancipation. Or to put things a bit differently, Lincoln lived in the nineteenth century, not the late twentieth or early twenty-first century.¹³

We can escape from this perplexity about Lincoln’s motives toward colonization if we consider it not as Lincoln’s *plan* but as *one* of Lincoln’s *plans*. Lincoln seems to have envisioned colonization as one of several things necessary to free the slaves and the nation from slavery. We have to avoid our natural tendency to want to see our great nation-saver with a single national plan. Lincoln himself has confused historians on this point. He did not clearly confine his amendments to specific parts of the nation. His first of the three amendments says “*Every State* [author’s emphasis] wherein slavery now exists, which shall abolish the same therein at any time, or times, before the first day of January, in the year of our Lord one thousand and nine hundred, shall receive compensation. . . .” But he must have meant only the border states, because the time left for Deep South states to benefit from any of this had practically vanished—it was thirty days away. Other parts of the nation would experience different colonization and emancipation options.

Lincoln saw colonization as one way to help blacks—those who wanted to leave this nation and set up in a place where white oppression would be less and where their own talents might flower. Other elements would also bring freedom to blacks who stayed here. Colonization does not have to be seen as *the* solution to what to do with the freed slaves. Lincoln knew it couldn’t do the full job. As early as the late 1850s he had doubted that many slaves could be colonized—the logistical obstacles were too great. Though Lincoln knew of the propaganda value of colonization, he also saw it as one part of a meritable overall policy. Limited colonization was inherent in Lincoln’s insistence that colonization be voluntary. He surely knew that many blacks and whites were against colonization.

Lincoln made reference to the limited nature of his plan when he met with the black delegation a few weeks before he issued the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation. Lincoln suggested to

14. *Collected Works*, 3:541; 5:535.

15. *The Diary of Gideon Welles*, 3 vols. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1960), 1:152. The

that delegation that their colonization would “give a start to white people.” I believe he meant that a successful colonization project or projects would show the white population that blacks could replicate the archetypal Republican success story of man conquering frontier, thereby building and demonstrating their own character. It was not a bad example to set. And if blacks showed their capacities in a distant place, maybe they might be welcomed back. Maybe colonization was a roundtrip ticket. Lincoln could reasonably support colonization and not be a racist advocate of “ethnic cleansing.” Opening opportunities for a population differs substantially from using slaughter and rape to drive them off the land.¹⁴

When Lincoln argued to Congress that the free black population would stay in the South and that, in any event, it was too small to threaten whites, he was not undercutting his colonization idea; he was describing options in addition to colonization. I think he was saying something like, “If freedpeople don’t want to colonize, although some do, those that stay won’t threaten white folks.” The president knew he lived in a world of diverse feelings and options, many of them quite racist.

Language of the time about colonization does provide some excuse for suspicion or confusion about Lincoln’s goal. Deportation was often used as a synonym for *colonization*. When people spoke of colonization, they were usually vague about how many blacks they had in mind: *all*, *most*, or *some* could be substituted by listeners. But while Lincoln was vague on how many would go, he rarely equated deportation with colonization. An electronic search through the *Collected Works* shows that Lincoln used *deportation* in two speeches, the first time in the Cooper Union address. There it was used in passing as a quote from Jefferson about the benefits of gradual and peaceful emancipation linked to deportation. The second time was in the Second Annual Message. But the president used the word after speaking several times of voluntary colonization, hence erasing the chance that colonization meant compulsion. In a cabinet meeting on September 24, 1862, when colonization came up, Attorney General Bates favored compulsory deportation. But Lincoln “objected emphatically. . . . Their emigration must be voluntary and without expense to themselves.”¹⁵

Indicative of the *many* plans Lincoln had underway is that on January 1, 1863, the president was moving to emancipation in four

comment about objecting emphatically comes from *Recollected Words of Abraham Lincoln* ed. Don and Virginia Fehrenbacher (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1996), 474–75.

directions: The proclamation itself covered only the areas still in rebellion; he had signed the Second Confiscation Act, which freed the slaves of loyal slave owners; he had let individual generals recruit blacks that came into their lines; and he was trying to sell his gradual emancipation plan predominantly to the border states. The proclamation itself was a hodgepodge that featured various ways of bringing freedom. Those slaves in places still in rebellion were “henceforth and forever free” as of January 1; slaves in territory occupied by the army would be free *de jure* if they had been slaves of loyal owners; slaves in that territory also were *de facto* free by joining the army as construction workers in some places and as soldiers in others. Reconstructing states, such as Tennessee, Louisiana, and Arkansas would have their fate settled by the state governments that were created in the process. Blacks would be made free in these places, but the states would control the fate of blacks by setting the rules for their freedom—and each state might have different rules. Small wonder that when Lincoln explained his reconstruction goals in his last public address he noted that a plan he had revealed in December 1863 was “not the only plan which might possibly be acceptable.”¹⁶

Gradual emancipation is also out of step with modern sensibilities. Like the abolitionists, we insist that slavery was a sin and moral people are not supposed to compromise with sin. A sin is wrong now and has been wrong forever. The Bible does not say, “Thou shalt not steal, as soon as you can work out some way to give up the habit.” Stealing is a sin. It breaks the laws of God. William Lloyd Garrison told his readers to ask a mother “to gradually extricate her babe from the fire into which it has fallen;—but urge me not to use moderation in a cause like the present.” Most modern

16. *Collected Works*, 8:401–2. William Harris, in *With Charity for All: Lincoln and the Restoration of the Union* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1997), agrees with the implications of this essay that Lincoln responded conservatively to the problems of Reconstruction. He says that the president wanted to keep as much of reconstruction in state hands as he could. He wanted to *restore* much more than to *reconstruct* the Union. The *Collected Works* sustains this position: *restoration* appears 56 times, *reconstruction* eight times. The president first used *reconstruction* on September 11, 1863, in a letter to Andrew Johnson, at that time the military governor of Tennessee. But Lincoln kept on using *restoration* even after he had used the other “r” word. As late as his July 8, 1864, “Proclamation on Reconstruction,” explaining his pocket veto of the Wade-Davis bill, Lincoln used the word *restore*. Only the title of the document uses *reconstruction*.

17. *Exodus* 20:15; Garrison’s statement is from his January 1, 1831, editorial in the *Liberator*, reprinted in *An American Primer*, ed. Daniel Boorstin (New York: Mentor Edition, 1968), 298.

Americans shout or at least nod, "Amen!"¹⁷

But passion and idealism was not confined to the Martin Luther Kings of the past. Conservatives might also speak with tongues of flame. And Lincoln did so out of a strong commitment to gradual, compensated emancipation with colonization. Although there is no evidence in Springfield, Illinois, newspapers of Lincoln's early involvement in local colonization organizations, he began to urge colonization and gradual emancipation while the Kansas crisis grew. He then continued to argue the benefits of these twin goals, urging them in that soaring and persuasive rhetoric that has misled historians into proclaiming him as our kind of egalitarian. But Lincoln was not the "Freedom Now" hero of our age. In supporting the colonization movement, what he admired especially was its gradualness. His 1852 eulogy for Henry Clay eloquently emphasized the project's careful advances toward greater equality. It was a gradual movement that respected the power, and probably the ideals, of conservatives of his age. The colonization society did not intrude into people's homes, it did not speak to the slaves to stir them up, it "affects no man's property." Colonization was a careful, conservative movement.

And as he continued his praise, Lincoln chose words from Clay himself that soared: "Cast into life where slavery was already widely spread and deeply seated, he did not perceive, as I think no wise man has perceived, how it could be at *once* eradicated, without producing a greater evil, even to the cause of human liberty. His feeling and his judgment, therefore, ever led him to oppose both extremes of opinion on the subject. Those who would shiver into fragments the Union of these States; tear to tatters its now venerated constitution; and even burn the last copy of the Bible rather than slavery should continue a single hour... are receiving their just execration."

And at the same time Lincoln also placed in the same dock "an increasing number of men, who, for the sake of perpetuating slavery, are beginning to assail and to ridicule the white man's charter of freedom—the declaration that "all men are created equal." Lincoln made no distinction between the opponents of colonization—abolitionists and defenders of slavery.

Attacking both camps, Lincoln chose some of Clay's most eloquent words, predicting the passion of the Second Annual Message.

18. *Collected Works*, 2:131.

19. *Ibid.*, 5:145.

20. *Ibid.*, 5:219, 223–24.

Opponents of gradual colonization from both extremes would stifle the movement of freedom. But to do so “they must go back to the era of our liberty and independence, and muzzle the cannon which thunders its annual joyous return. . . . They must blow out the moral lights around us and extinguish that greatest torch of all; which America presents to a benighted world.” They also would need to stifle the growing freedom in South America and reopen the horrors of the slave trade. Even then these opponents would not have their work done. For they must “penetrate the human soul, and eradicate the light of reason, and the love of liberty.” Lincoln’s use of such stakes-raising rhetoric again demonstrates the passionate commitment he had when it came to gradual, compensated emancipation.¹⁸

When the war came, Lincoln retained his commitment to this program. With the war almost a year old, Lincoln revived his gradual, compensated emancipation project. At this time his rhetoric was more moderate but the stakes were just as high. If passed this new proposal would end the war, save lives, and preserve the Union. It was, he said, “the most efficient means of self preservation.” It would “substantially end the rebellion.” On March 6, 1862, Lincoln recommended a joint resolution of Congress “that the United States ought to co-operate with any state which may adopt gradual abolishment of slavery, giving to such state pecuniary aid, to be used by such state at its discretion, to compensate for the inconveniences public and private, produced by such change of system.” Lincoln wasn’t just pipe dreaming here either. He explained how this measure would operate. The rebellion rested on a belief by the Confederacy that border slaves states would drop into rebel Dixie should the Union ever appear to weaken in its resolve. The foundation for the rebel belief lay in the powerful prejudices that attended the institution of slavery and made kinsmen of slave owners. But if loyal slave states could be persuaded to leave the slave-owning fraternity, they would end all hope in Deep Dixie that rebels could ever claim the assistance and support of those states. And emancipation under this plan would be a gradual process. “In my judgment,” he wrote, “gradual, and not sudden emancipation is better for all.”¹⁹

Lincoln returned to his project on May 19, 1862. As he revoked General David Hunter’s emancipation of slaves in the Sea Islands,

21. Lincoln, “Appeal to Border State Representatives,” *Ibid*, 5:317–19.

22. *The Diary of Orville Hickman Browning*, ed. Theodore Calvin Pease and James

he spoke directly to the border states to institute gradual, compensated emancipation and colonization. Again the passion emerged: "I do not argue. I beseech you to make the arguments for yourselves. You cannot, if you would, be blind to the signs of the times. I beg you a calm and enlarged consideration of them, ranging it may be, far above personal and partisan politics." Gradual emancipation with compensation would bring freedom "as gently as the dews of heaven, not rending or wrecking anything." Lincoln's devotion to the idea gave wings to his rhetoric. "Will you not embrace it? So much good has not been done, by one effort in all past time, as, in the providence of God, it is now your high privilege to do. May the vast future not have to lament that you have neglected it." I can't think of any other specific proposal that Lincoln ever championed with such eloquence.²⁰

Lincoln spoke a third time in behalf of gradual, compensated emancipation. On July 12, 1862, he read to the border state representatives a carefully prepared message, beseeching them one more time to choose the plan. "[Y]ou of the border-states, hold more power for good, than any other equal number of members," Lincoln began. "If you all could have voted for the resolution in the gradual emancipation message, the war would now be substantially ended. And the plan therein proposed is yet the most potent and rapid means of ending it." The war endangered slavery anyway: "If the war continues long, as it must if the result be not sooner attained, the institution in your states will be extinguished by mere friction and abrasion—by the mere incidents of the war." He reminded them of the cautious quality of the orderly and careful process he sought and promised them there was a place for blacks to go: "I do not speak of emancipation *at once*, but of a *decision* at once, to emancipate *gradually*—Room in South America for colonization, can be obtained cheaply, and in abundance; and when numbers shall be large enough to be company and encouragement for one another, the freed people will not be so reluctant to go." Then finally, a last heartfelt appeal: "You are patriots and statesmen; and, as such, I pray you, consider this proposition; and, at the least, commend it to the consideration of your states and people. As you would perpetuate popular government for the best people in the world, I beseech you that you do in no wise omit this. Our common country is in great peril, demanding the loftiest views, and boldest action to bring its speedy relief. Once relieved, it's [sic] form of govern-

G. Randall, 2 vols. (Springfield: Illinois State Historical Library, 1925), 1:591; Davis to Leonard Swett, November 26, 1862, Papers of David Davis, Illinois State Historical

ment is saved to the world; it's [sic] beloved history, and cherished memories, are vindicated; and it's [sic] happy future fully assured, rendered inconceivably grand. To you, more than to any others, the privilege [sic] is given, to assure that happiness, and swell that grandeur, and to link your own names therewith forever."²¹ The next time Lincoln spoke publicly of his plan was in the Second Annual Message, ending with the eloquence we've already heard.

His friends confirm Lincoln's zeal for gradualism and colonization. In late November 1862 David Davis, his "intimate friend," as Lincoln called him, visited the president in the White House and wrote to a colleague: "Mr. Lincoln's whole soul is absorbed in his plan of remunerative emancipation." Another close associate, Orville Browning, reading the Second Annual Message remarked, "It surprised me . . . by the hallucination the President seems to be laboring under that Congress can suppress the rebellion by adopting his plan of compensated emancipation . . ."²²

The prevailing historical narrative usually ends the story of colonization and gradual emancipation with the dramatic deed that occurred after the border states turned down Lincoln the third time—the Emancipation Proclamation.²³ One hears little about Lincoln's abiding interest in colonizing. Indeed, Neely has challenged perhaps the major piece of evidence that bespeaks the president's abiding interest. Ben Butler's *Book* claims that in 1864 he and Lincoln met and that Lincoln said he hoped that colonization would be pursued. It would have been impossible, Neely shows, for the two men to have met on the day that Butler said they met. But it is well to note that the preliminary proclamation of September 1862 still spoke of "all states" where the people formed loyal governments adopting "immediate or gradual abolishment of slavery" and of their efforts "to colonize persons of African descent."

We might note that through much of 1863 and 1864, while Lincoln stopped talking publicly about colonization, he was acting to do it. For a while he encouraged a project in Chirique (a venture which a sponsor said had enlisted nearly five thousand freedmen)

Library, Springfield, Ill. "Intimate friend" comment comes from John Hay, *Diary*, 245.

23. See John G. Nicolay and John Hay, *Abraham Lincoln: A History*, 10 vols. (New York: Century, 1917).

24. Benjamin F. Butler, *Butler's Book* (Boston: Thayer, 1892); Inside *Lincoln's White House: The Complete Diary of John Hay*, ed. Michael Burlingame and John R. Turner Ettlinger (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1997), 217.

25. Daniel Stowell, Director of the Papers of Abraham Lincoln, suggested this

and then moved in behalf of the Ile de Vache effort. Both failed, but Lincoln still seems to have retained his hopes for the gradual process until sometime around July 1, 1864. It was that late that John Hay would note in his dairy: "I am glad the President has sloughed off that idea of colonization. I have always thought it as a hideous and barbarous humbug."²⁴ Lincoln then seems to have abandoned the idea as much because of the complications and corruption that attended the enterprise as out of a belief that he should now become more liberal.

Of course by the time the war ended the gradual, compensated emancipation plan had faded away. Immediate emancipation for all slaves was the result of the Thirteenth Amendment. Few owners were compensated, and no large group of slaves chose to be colonized anywhere. The compelling and immediate demands of war led the Union and its president to take revolutionary steps. But once, during the war, Lincoln had declared publicly the way he thought it should have been, a change that "would come gently as the dews of heaven." We may be shocked, or made uneasy, by moving so slowly toward freedom for all. Certainly the slaves themselves would be justified in crying "How long, oh Israel!"

Yet in giving this topic the wide-ranging discussion it deserves, three final points need to be raised.²⁵ First, all emancipations do not have to be bathed in blood. Thirteen states in the northern United States managed to free their slaves, often gradually and always peacefully. Other nations in the world ended bondage with little gunfire. Second, the economic costs of the war vastly overwhelmed the costs needed for compensated emancipation. Economists Claudia Golden and Frank Lewis estimated that the war cost over \$6.5 billion. Had those dollars been used to end slavery, the government could have purchased and freed 4 million slaves, provided forty acres and a mule to every freed family, and still had left \$3.5 billion for reparations to slaves for centuries of unrequited toil. And none of the 620,000 soldiers would have given their lives. Third, the move to colonize away from white oppression did not fade among African Americans. The Exoduster movement of 1879 sent thousands of blacks to Kansas. Major black leaders, including bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church Henry McNeal

postwar inquiry to me.

26. See Claudia Golden and Frank Lewis, "The Economic Cost of the American Civil War: Estimates and Implications," *Journal of Economic History* 35 (1975):294-326; Paludan, "What Did the Winners Win? The Social and Economic History of the North during the Civil War," *Writing the Civil War: The Quest to Understand*, ed.

Turner and Marcus Garvey, sought a haven overseas. And that only includes “Back to Africa” movements up to the 1930s. But no one knew this future at the time.²⁶

After December 1, 1862, most of the reaction to Lincoln’s favorite plan was negative. But the *New York Times* thought that there might be some merit in what Lincoln had said: “The President is to be commended for his largeness of view. He rises above the little makeshifts of the day which so easily satisfy the mousing politician, and like a true statesman, seeks a broad policy which shall embrace and protect the future as well as the present.” It would be best for the slaves themselves and the country at large to be saved from “the sudden summary smiting blow of the military arm. It should be left if possible to civil deliberation to devise and apply some gradual process—one that while it shall be equally effectual for the extinction of the institution yet shall be free of all constitutional objections, shall secure the cheerful concurrence of some, at least, of the Southern States, and shall involve no peril to either society or the civil structure.”²⁷

Could Lincoln have said it better himself? Probably, but this was close to what he wanted to achieve. The Second Annual Message had stated Lincoln’s hope for how lasting emancipation would be achieved. But men, even great heroes, do not always get what they want in the way they want it. That may be a tragedy (a fortunate one?).

James McPherson and William Cooper Jr. (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1998) 174–200, esp. 181 ff.

27. *New York Times*, December 2 and 3, 1862, p. 3.