

Michael Zuckert

THINKIN' ABOUT LINCOLN

I have chosen my title not merely for its poetic qualities, but because it points us in the right direction on Lincoln: he supplies matter for thinking beyond any other figure of our national life.¹ Something of why this is so is suggested by Woodrow Wilson, who looked back to Lincoln in order to understand what Lincoln's greatness implied for the challenges the U.S. and Wilson himself faced in the early twentieth century. On the 100th anniversary of Lincoln's birth Wilson asked his audience: Have you ever looked at some of those singular statues of the great French sculptor Rodin – those pieces of marble in which only some part of a figure is revealed and the rest is left in the hidden lines of the marble itself; here there emerges the arm and the bust and the eager face, it may be, of a man, but his body is appears in the general bulk of the stone, and the lines fall off vaguely? These sculptures reminded Wilson of Lincoln:

There was a little disclosed of him, but not all. You feel that he was so far from exhausted by the demands of his life that more remained unrevealed than was disclosed to our view...He is like some great reservoir of living water which you can freely quaff but can never exhaust.²

As Wilson so well has it, the more we come to understand about Lincoln, the more there seems yet to understand. He is not, for example, like Thomas Jef-

¹ The attentive reader will notice that I take issue with Harry Jaffa at various points in this essay, but I wish to note at the outset my great debt to his marvelous study of Lincoln, *Crisis of the House Divided*. Even where I disagree with him I am much beholden to him.

² W. Wilson, *Abraham Lincoln: A Man of the People*, [in:] *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, ed. A. S. Link, Princeton 1975, Vol. 19, p. 36.

ferson, a brilliant man, a versatile man, a good man, mostly. But Jefferson, for all his complications, is graspable – he is not shallow but he can be plumbed. Lincoln lacks Jefferson’s breadth; he could never be considered an Enlightenment savant, he was not immersed in all the philosophy, science, and mathematics of his day. He was not the beneficiary of one of the best educations of his day, the possessor of the best private library in North America. Lincoln wins our admiration and amazement for studying Euclid’s *Geometry* while riding circuit as a young Illinois lawyer, but this does not compare to Jefferson’s mastery of the intricacies of La Place’s celestial mechanics.³

To return to Woodrow Wilson’s metaphor – Jefferson is like a frieze from the Parthenon – a large capacious story, well-defined, and all visible to the eye if one takes the time to walk around and see the whole. But Lincoln has depth where Jefferson has breadth. One is never sure one has seen to the bottom of him – or rather one is nearly certain one has not seen to the bottom of him. Yet it seems that we are not thinking as much of Lincoln as we once did, or thinking as well of him either. By the first claim I mean not only that we do not think as often, but also not as well; by the second claim I mean not only that we do not think as highly, but that we don’t think as wisely or, well, thoughtfully, as Americans once did. In his same essay on Lincoln Woodrow Wilson had said of his subject: It is not necessary that I should rehearse for you the life of Abraham Lincoln. It has been written in every school book. It has been rehearsed in every family. It were to impeach your intelligence to tell you the story of his life.⁴

Today I doubt we can say what Wilson said, that Lincoln’s life is “rehearsed in every family.” And while he still appears in school books, it is not in so positive a way as in Wilson’s day. Of course, Lincoln has not fallen to the level of, say, Millard Fillmore or Warren G. Harding in the estimate of the American people. It is rather that we have a profoundly ambiguous relation toward him. He still receives great honor as, for example, in the periodic ratings of the Presidents in American history by panels of historians. Lincoln usually appears as one of only three “greats” – Washington and F.D.R. being the other two. Often, Lincoln is even considered the greatest of the great. Nevertheless, we must note that these are polls of presidency scholars, and they are not representative of overall scholarly, much less popular opinion. Another poll that appeared a few years back, for example, gave the ratings of the Presidents by the public at large. Lincoln does not do badly in this poll, but he by no means ranked first – that honor belongs to John Kennedy. Certainly this list reflects the notorious present-mindedness and lack of historical knowledge and perspective of the American public, but the decline in Lincoln’s standing in the minds of his compatriots rests on a bit more than that, I suspect. Certain reservations – in some cases serious reservations – have spread about Lincoln,

³ Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, March 21, 1819, [in:] *The Adam-Jefferson Letters*, ed. L. J. Cappon, New York 1971, p. 536.

⁴ W. Wilson, *Abraham Lincoln...*, p. 33–34.

as, over the course of the twentieth century, we as a nation have been led to reassess our history and the meaning and value of the great men within it.

In the case of Lincoln there have been two waves of reassessments corresponding, roughly, to the two halves of the twentieth century. The first, sponsored by some of the great historians of the Civil War, came to reconsider Lincoln's statecraft, especially as practiced in the pre-Civil War period. In brief, they faulted Lincoln because he took an overly intransigent position in the pre-war period, and together with the abolitionists and some of his Republican party allies he transformed a conflict that could have been compromised and settled in a peaceful way into a situation with all the earmarks of a Greek tragedy. The Civil War was not inevitable in itself, according to this line of thought,⁵ but Lincoln and his friends made it so by their intractability. Lincoln famously had said: "A house divided against itself cannot stand. I believe this government cannot endure, permanently half slave and half free." These historians believe that Lincoln, by pronouncing and acting on the principles of his house divided speech, created the situation, the climate of opinion in which the entire South could do naught but see his election as a declaration of war against them and their institutions, and thus had no choice but to leave the union. At the same time, Lincoln insisted that he did "not expect the Union to be dissolved – [he did not] expect the house to fall – but [he did] expect it will cease to be divided." What Lincoln stated as a mere prediction, however, was for him an imperative of policy, and he was resolved not to allow the dissolution of the union. The now unstoppable force of Lincoln-inspired Southern fear met the immovable object of Lincolnian resolve to maintain the Union. Once the issue was defined that way the result was as inevitable as Oedipus killing his father: civil war. These historians find evidence Lincoln understood and even accepted his role as thus defined. In the "House Divided" speech itself Lincoln predicted that the political agitation roiling American life in the 1850's over slavery "will not cease, until a crisis shall have been reached, and passed." The historians see here not so much prophecy, however, as "self-fulfilling prophecy" – Lincoln as fomenting the very crisis he predicts. This line of argument about the Civil War and Lincoln became powerful during the first half of the 20th century and was associated with a national reassessment of the end result of the Civil War. The segregation system replaced slavery in the South, while Northern opinion lost all zeal for any sort of civil rights agenda, for remaking Southern society, or for attending to sectionally divisive issues that might interfere with the explosive economic expansionism of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The historians, breathing in the spirit of their own age, redefined the war from the "irrepressible conflict" it had been called at the time to the "avoidable conflict," with Lincoln and the abolitionists the chief characters in snatching

⁵ See: H. V. Jaffa, *Crisis of the House Divided*, Seattle 1973, p. 19–27; T. J. Pressly, *Americans Interpret Their Civil War*, New York 1965, p. 289–362; S. B. Oates, *Abraham Lincoln*, New York 1985, p. 17–21. The above cited texts are all surveys of the revisionist position and can point the interested reader to the primary sources.

war from the jaws of peace. Historians varied a good deal in the motivations they attributed to Lincoln. Some thought it was just an instance of poor judgment, for example, that he didn't understand what kind of war his crisis would actually be. At the outbreak of fighting Lincoln called for 75,000 volunteers to serve a three-month enlistment. To put these numbers in some sort of perspective, recall that the Civil War left nearly 620,000 dead on both sides, 400,000 more wounded, before it was over, four years later.⁶ Others see the entire episode even less favorably to Lincoln. One very famous essay, "Abraham Lincoln and the Self-Made Myth," attributed all Lincoln's action to nothing so much as his soaring personal ambition – he was willing to risk all, to risk the future of his country, and the lives of his countrymen – so that he might hold high office.⁷ Yet others see Lincoln's aims more impersonally, but equally critically. One historian, in my presence, branded Lincoln a "moral fanatic" in direct line of descent from John Calvin, a line which ran through the American Puritans (you remember the *Scarlet Letter*), through Lincoln, to Lenin, Stalin, and Hitler. This judgment, I believe, is particularly unbalanced, but the charge of moral fanaticism or plain immoralism is much more widespread. A much more recent variant on these views is the psychoanalytic approach to Lincoln. The psycho-historians note that Lincoln engaged in the regular practice of calling those who founded the American regime "our fathers." Once one is thinking in a Freudian vein it is impossible to avoid the conclusion that Lincoln was driven by classical Oedipal motives – to kill the fathers (through undoing their handiwork, the American political system), and replacing them himself.⁸

Ironically, the charges raised against Lincoln in the second half of the twentieth century are more or less opposite to those raised earlier. Critics no longer complain about Lincoln's intransigence, immoralism, or desire to radically question the authority of the fathers, but about his half-heartedness, the narrowness of his motives, actions and views, the deep conservatism of all he did and thought. This line of thought about Lincoln emerged in the wake of the Civil Rights movement, and instead of sympathizing with Stephen A. Douglas (consciously or otherwise) as the earlier critics had done, these sympathized with the abolitionists. Lincoln, they insist, may have signed the document that freed the slaves, but he did not much like black people, did not want to free slaves, favored the interests of whites only, and did not see America as a place for whites and blacks to live in together. In the final analysis these charges amount to the accusations of racism, conservatism (he

⁶ J. R. Hummel, *Emancipating Slaves, Enslaving Free Men*, Chicago 1996, p. 2.

⁷ R. Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition*, New York 1948, p. 93–137. The theme of Lincoln's ambition plays a large role in the most recent full-scale biography, D. H. Donald, *Lincoln*, New York 1996. See also: D. E. Fehrenbacher, *Prelude to Greatness*, Stanford 1962, p. 21–22; J. P. Diggins, *The Lost Soul of American Politics*, Chicago 1984, p. 309; J. D. Greenstone, *The Lincoln Persuasion*, Princeton 1993, p. 12–14.

⁸ G. Forgie, *Patricide in the House Divided: A Psychological Interpretation of Lincoln and His Age*, New York 1979; D. Anderson, *Abraham Lincoln: The Quest for Immortality*, New York 1982. Even as sensible a historian, and as much an admirer of Lincoln as John P. Diggins is much taken with the psychoanalytic approach. *The Lost Soul...*, esp. 389 n. 25. Also see: J. D. Greenstone, *The Lincoln Persuasion...*, p. 14–16.

revered the work of “the fathers”), and pro-capitalism (he spoke of the virtues of free markets very frequently).⁹ The two charges together are thus very serious. On the one side Lincoln is held to be drastically deficient in his state-craft, deficient politically. On the other side, he is held to be deficient morally. Together they surely help account for why we are not thinkin’ about Lincoln either so often or so highly as Americans once did. My task in this essay is not, however, to speculate on the relative decline in Lincoln’s cosmic “approval rating” but to engage, or reengage, with Lincoln. I want to use the factors that are parts of his decline as occasions to reflect a bit, partly to defend, partly merely to ruminate over Lincoln. Let me deal with the first set of charges about Lincoln in terms of the question: was Lincoln right, or was Stephen A. Douglas right, in their great debates? Those debates concerned a very simple question: what should national policy be with respect to the presence (or absence) of slavery in the territories belonging to the United States not yet organized as states of the union?¹⁰ In those debates each stood for one policy – Douglas for the policy of territorial self-determination, or popular sovereignty, or, as it was sometimes called by its detractors, “squatter sovereignty.” Lincoln stood for the prohibition of slavery in the territories, at least those territories north of the old Missouri Compromise line.

Douglas’ policy of popular sovereignty was a brilliant solution to an intractable problem of politics both high and low.¹¹ The policy itself was simple. Instead of Congress deciding whether slavery would or would not be allowed to exist in the territories, as had been the approach mainly taken since the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, Douglas proposed that the people of each territory be allowed to settle the question for themselves.¹² The issue was especially important, for if slavery were allowed to be planted in a territory, it would almost inevitably come into the union as a slave state, and vice versa. Given the way representation in the Senate works, and the role of Senatorial representation in the electoral college, the relative number of free and slave states was a matter of central importance to all sections of the nation. In 1858, the year of the Lincoln-Douglas debates, the tally of states stood at fifteen slave and seventeen free. The trend-line was running in favor of free states, however, for a mere decade earlier (and for a long while before that) the tally was equal. Moreover, the future as of 1858 seemed to favor freedom even more. Oregon would soon enter as a free state; Kansas was to reject the fraudulent Lecompton slave Constitution, and would no doubt join the column of free states soon. Prospects for more new states in existing federal territory were great, while those for new slave states were decidedly less so. The relatively clear direction in

⁹ For representatives of this critique, see S. B. Oates, *Abraham Lincoln...*, p. 21–30.

¹⁰ D. E. Fehrenbacher, *Prelude...*, p. 104–112.

¹¹ Admittedly Douglas was not the first to think up this solution to the problem of slavery in the territories. That honor seems to belong to Lewis Cass. See: S. A. Douglas, *The Life and Speeches of Stephen A. Douglas*, New York 1860, Vol. 1, p. 48.

¹² On policy regarding slavery in the territories, see the excellent survey in D. E. Fehrenbacher, *The Slaveholding Republic*, New York 2001, p. 253–294.

which matters were heading after 1850 did not take the edge off the political battles over the status of the territories. If anything, both sides became more insistent and intransigent, the one in an effort to at least keep its cause in the running, so to speak; the other to garner the fruits of the victories that seemed to be coming its way. Therefore the strongest political passions were brought to bear on Congress as it attempted to deal with the territories. As the 19th century wore on, these passions were producing an explosive situation in Washington. All of national politics was caught up in the sectional conflict and the sections' anger centering on the territorial issue. Douglas – and not Douglas alone – “was convinced that the Union would not survive differences of opinion on slavery” if these were fought out in the national legislature.¹³ One important scholar of the era has even argued that Douglas' position was thoroughly anti-slavery (or pro-freedom) in its ultimate aims and intended effects. Douglas was committed to the dual policies of popular sovereignty and territorial expansionism. He believed that “the organization of new territory would rapidly result in new free states, [and] would lead to an overwhelming preponderance of freedom over slavery.”¹⁴

Douglas' solution was elegant. The principle of America, he said, is self-government; therefore, let the people of each territory govern themselves, decide for themselves. Why should Washington dictate a solution? Douglas saw his proposal become official policy when the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 embodied the popular sovereignty principle. At a stroke Douglas thought he had found a way to settle what appeared to be a union-threatening conflict. The center of conflict under Douglas' popular sovereignty would no longer be Washington, but would be the local territories themselves. (“Bleeding Kansas” replaced “ranting Washington”). The question of whether to allow slavery in any given territory would no longer catch up the entire political nation, no longer involve the whole Congress and the Presidency. As Douglas said in explaining his policy, his idea was

not only [to] furnish adequate remedies for existing evils, but, in all times to come, avoid the perils of a similar agitation, by withdrawing the question of slavery from the halls of Congress and the political arena, and committing it to the arbitrament of those who were immediately interested in it, and alone responsible for its consequences.¹⁵

Popular sovereignty, he thought, was not only the embodiment of the right principle, democratic self-government, but it was the policy with the best results: “my friends,” he said in his first debate against Lincoln, “if we will only act conscientiously and rigidly upon this great principle of popular sovereignty, which guarantees to each State and Territory the right to do as it pleases in all things local and domestic instead of Congress interfering, we will continue at peace with one

¹³ H. V. Jaffa, *Crisis...*, p. 44. Also see: J. D. Greenstone, *The Lincoln Persuasion...*, p. 26–28, 140–153.

¹⁴ H. V. Jaffa, *Crisis...*, p. 48.

¹⁵ S. A. Douglas, Special Senate Report, January 4, 1854, quoted in: H. V. Jaffa, *Crisis...*, p. 155.

another.”¹⁶ “When that principle is recognized,” Douglas said in rebuttal to Lincoln at Ottawa,

you will have peace and harmony and fraternal feeling between all the States of this Union; until you do recognize that doctrine there will be sectional warfare agitating and distracting the country.¹⁷

It was a masterful effort to deflect and disarm conflict. Among other virtues of the policy from Douglas' point of view was that it appeared to avoid what was becoming the most intensely felt element of this conflict: for Congress to make a pronouncement on the subject amounted to a national endorsement of the principles and institutions of one or the other section and implicitly a rejection of the other. Since Congress had forbidden slavery in the past, the South felt as though its special institutions and values were disvalued by the nation; the South felt slighted and demanded that its institutions be recognized as equally valuable. After all, the Southern states were just as much parts of the American federal union as were the Northern states. Douglas' popular sovereignty policy gave the South at least part of what it wanted – if not national endorsement of slavery, then at least a cessation of the national condemnation of slavery. The South was offended in the way dissenting religious groups are offended when the state officially recognizes holidays, symbols, or doctrines of other religious groups. They felt like second-class citizens, they felt dishonored. Douglas' solution was really very like the principle adopted to deal with religious disagreement: The state becomes strictly neutral between the competing positions. There is no establishment of religion, and under Douglas' popular sovereignty the federal government is to remain strictly neutral between Northern principles of freedom and Southern principles of slavery, just as it is between Methodists and Presbyterians. As Douglas frequently said when out on the hustings, he didn't care whether slavery was voted up or down, just that it be voted.¹⁸ A neutral stance, a democratic stance. But Douglas was not so personally neutral as these public statements imply. He did not particularly wish to see slavery spread, and thought that his policy would not in fact lead to the spread of slavery. He believed that slavery took root – or not – not because of laws, but because of physical conditions. Some climates (and resulting agricultural systems) are suited to slavery and other climates are not. Nature, not law would decide where slavery would go, and thus the divisive political battles could be avoided in a way that made no difference to the ultimate outcomes.¹⁹

¹⁶ S. A. Douglas, Speech at Ottawa, Ill., August 21, 1858, reprinted in: *Lincoln*, ed. D. E. Fehrenbacher, Vol. 1, p. 507.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 535.

¹⁸ See: S. A. Douglas, Speech at Freeport, Ill., August 27, 1858, *ibidem*, Vol. 1, p. 555, 569; Speech at Galesburg, Ill., October 7, 1858, *ibidem*, Vol. 1, p. 687, 690, 698, 700, and esp. 726. See also: *ibidem*, Vol. 1, p. 415, 456.

¹⁹ See H. V. Jaffa, *Crisis...*, p. 41–62.

Douglas' position was thus a statesmanly position. It aimed to promote political peace and harmony, and to avoid both the Scylla of disunion and the Charybdis of civil war that the nation seemed to face in the 1850's. No wonder historians came to censure Lincoln for intransigently framing the issue in his "House Divided" metaphor in such a way that Douglas' pacific and harmonizing policy could not succeed, framing the issue in a sectional rather than a national way, and thus forcing the nation to face first Scylla and then Charybdis. Thinkin' well about Lincoln, i.e. deeply and honestly, requires facing up to the challenge of Douglas and the historians who, in effect, endorse Douglas' statesmanship over Lincoln's. Lincoln did everything in his power to prevent the country from adopting Douglas' policy of popular sovereignty. He had dropped out of politics in 1850 after one term in Congress. He had made himself unelectable in his district by publicly opposing the Mexican War. Not only was he unpopular personally, but his traditional Whig district went to a Democrat in apparent "repudiation of... Lincoln's views on the Mexican War."²⁰ He had turned his attention more seriously to his legal practice than ever before and seemed resolved to make his life outside of politics²¹. His plans changed in 1854, when, in the Kansas-Nebraska Act, the Douglas popular sovereignty approach became law of the land and the Missouri compromise was repealed. Lincoln's change of direction was remarkable. He started to research the history of the slavery question in America and turned back to politics – not, as before, oriented around the small-time activities of electioneering, but devoted to the preparation of a series of speeches, long speeches, speeches filled with the results of his research, passionate speeches – none directed to gaining office but all aimed at one object: to show the perniciousness of the Douglas policy and the corresponding "propriety of the restoration of the Missouri Compromise."²² Lincoln insisted that the question of substantive principle – the question of the inherent right or wrong of slavery – could not be pushed aside in favor of the procedural solution of popular sovereignty. Now this may seem the obviously correct answer, but we cannot rest so easy with it. Conceding that Lincoln is correct about the moral evil of slavery, it is *still* a fact that he was not about to change the minds of the slaveholders or their allies. Moreover, he was far from an abolitionist – he conceded that despite the moral wrong of slavery, the states where it existed were the only political agents with any power or right under the Constitution to do anything about it. And he knew they were not about to abolish slavery any time soon. It is not at all

²⁰ D. E. Fehrenbacher, *Prelude...*, p. 1.

²¹ A. Lincoln, Speech at Chicago, Ill, July 10, 1858; Speech at Springfield, Ill, July 17, 1858, in: *Lincoln...*, Vol. 1, p. 447, 491 (all references to Lincoln's speeches and writings not otherwise identified are to this edition); D. E. Fehrenbacher, *Prelude...*, p. 20. Fehrenbacher does persuasively challenge the older view that Lincoln turned his back completely on politics between 1850 and 1854, however.

²² This was the announced topic of Lincoln's Speech at Peoria, October 16, 1854, I 307. According to Donald, Lincoln had delivered the gist of this address many times before October 16, especially on October 4 in the hall of the Illinois House of Representatives in Springfield. The address on the Missouri Compromise is especially associated with Peoria, for on this occasion Lincoln prepared and distributed to the press a written version of his text. D. H. Donald, *Lincoln...*, p. 173–178.

clear, then, that any moral good could follow from Lincoln's policy, but it certainly was clear to Douglas that much political evil would follow – an intensified return to all the political conflict preceding 1854. Lincoln's position, in other words, looks quite irresponsible. Among all the other things that make Lincoln so worth thinkin' about was his marvelous self-awareness, his ability to address directly and forcefully the issues raised by his actions. He tells us why he left his now fairly lucrative law practice, why he took it upon himself to speak out against the leading politician in Illinois and one of the leading politicians in the U.S. He gave up the comfortable life into which he had settled, because, he tells us, "I can not but hate ... this declared indifference [to] ... the spread of slavery."²³ Hatred – a strong sentiment from a man who, at the end of a war that filled everyone with hatred, preached "malice toward none, and charity for all." Lincoln hated the Douglas policy of indifference to slavery expansion and came out of retirement to voice that hatred, and to try to make others feel it, too. I hate it [he said in 1854] because of the monstrous injustice of slavery itself. I hate it because it deprives our republican example of its just influence in the world ... and especially [I hate it] because it forces so many good men amongst ourselves into an open war with the very fundamental principle of civil liberty – criticizing the Declaration of Independence, and insisting there is no right principle of action but self-interest.²⁴ Lincoln hates Douglas' approach for its effects on three different groups: first, on the slaves themselves; second, on those foreigners who are enemies to America and republicanism, and who are heartened by the existence of slavery in the midst of freedom, for this proves to them the hypocrisy of the Americans. As Samuel Johnson said at the time of the American revolution, "How is it that we hear the loudest yelps for liberty among the drivers of negroes?"²⁵ Finally, Lincoln hates the effect on "many good men amongst ourselves" – it leads them into opposition to the Declaration of Independence and the principles of political right. Perhaps surprisingly, Lincoln identified this last as his most "especial" ground for hating the principle of indifference or neutrality with regard to slavery. Lincoln definitely had a point. In 1848, John C. Calhoun, the leading thinker of the South in the ante-bellum era, stated on the floor of the U.S. Senate that the claim made in the Declaration of Independence "that all men are born free and equal" is a "dangerous error."²⁶ Senator John Pettit of Indiana, on that same Senate floor, called the Declaration of Independence a "self-evident lie" in 1854 in a speech in favor of Douglas' bill to repeal the Missouri Compromise.²⁷ Stephen Douglas did not deny the Declaration outright, as these men had done, but

²³ A. Lincoln, Address at Peoria, Vol. 1, p. 315.

²⁴ *Ibidem*.

²⁵ Quoted in: P. Finkelman, *Jefferson and Slavery*, [in:] *Jeffersonian Legacies*, ed. P. S. Onuf, Charlottesville 1993, p. 192.

²⁶ J. C. Calhoun, "Speech on the Oregon Bill," June 27, 1848, reprinted in: *Union and Liberty: The Political Philosophy of John C. Calhoun*, ed. R. M. Lance, Indianapolis 1992, p. 569.

²⁷ As quoted by A. Lincoln in his Peoria Address, Vol. 1, p. 339, and in the seventh debate with Douglas at Alton, Vol. 1, p. 795.

he was led to engage in some fancy footwork to accommodate his policies to it. The signers of the Declaration of Independence [Douglas said in 1857], referred to the white race alone, and not to the Africans, when they declared all men to have been created equal... They were speaking of British subjects on this continent being equal to British subjects born and residing in Great Britain.²⁸

Douglas was forced to transform a statement of natural law and natural rights into a mere reference to positive British law; he takes language which is overtly universalistic – it refers to *all men*, not to Britons, or Europeans, or whites – and turns it into a very particularistic (and racist) statement. Douglas reaffirms the Declaration only at the cost of changing its meaning entirely. According to *his* reading, even the French, when they looked to the American Declaration at the time of their own revolution, were mistaken in thinking that the freedom and equality mentioned there had anything to do with them, since they were not British subjects. In later statements Douglas amended his position, for reasons Lincoln explained in an 1854 address: In his construction of the Declaration last year he said it only meant that Americans in America were equal to Englishmen in England. Then, when I pointed out to him that by that rule he excludes the Germans, the Irish, the Portuguese, and all the other people who have come amongst us since the Revolution, [groups who were among Douglas' electoral supporters], he reconstructs his construction. In his last speech he tells us it meant Europeans. Lincoln did not let him off with that, however. I press him a little further, and ask if it meant to include the Russians in Asia? Or he means to exclude that vast population from the principles of our Declaration of Independence? I expect ere long he will introduce another amendment to his definition. He is not at all particular.²⁹ Of course, Douglas had to read the Declaration in these unprincipled and shifting ways to make it compatible both with his “don't care” position and with the make-up of free American society in the 1850's. From Lincoln's point of view, perhaps the most discouraging sign of the war slavery provoked against the Declaration of Independence was the decision by the U.S. Supreme Court, the most authoritative interpreter of the Constitution in the land, in the famous Dred Scot case. There, the Chief Justice of the United States, the highest member of the highest court, said that the Declaration could not possibly have been meant to apply to members of “the African race,” who, he concluded, “had no rights which the white man was bound to respect.”³⁰

This is the fulfillment to a tee of what Lincoln had feared three years earlier in 1854 – that good men would reject the very principles of civil liberty and instead insist “there is no right principle of action but self-interest.” All three of Lincoln's points end up being variants of his first point: Douglas' policy ignores the monstrous injustice of slavery. It is this injustice which robs American institutions of

²⁸ As quoted in A. Lincoln, Speech on the Dred Scott Decision, Springfield, IL, June 26, 1857, Vol. 1, p. 399.

²⁹ A. Lincoln, Speech at Springfield, IL, July 17, 1858, Vol. 1, p. 477.

³⁰ Dred Scott v. Sanford, 19 Howard 393 (1857).

their power of example in the world, and which threatens to rob America of its own commitment to “right principles of political action.” Lincoln’s point here is a bit more subtle than it seems, however. It is not slavery itself that does these bad things so much as the Douglas approach to slavery, i.e. the declaration of official indifference to its rightness or wrongness. Lincoln thought slavery a monstrous injustice, but he thought it could be lived with for the time being, so long as the prohibition on the spread of slavery remained in the law to serve two crucial purposes: (1) to affirm the inherent wrong of slavery by not being neutral about it; and (2) to give the public mind reason to believe that slavery was “in course of ultimate extinction.”³¹

In that second wave of criticism of Lincoln after the start of the civil rights movement he was blamed for being so tolerant of slavery as this, blamed for opposing intransigently and immediately not the evil itself but the mere out-works of the evil, the peripheral matter of the spread of the evil, all the while affirming his willingness to tolerate it where it existed and even to recapture fugitive slaves for those who engaged in the evil. Lincoln, apparently, hated Douglas’ stated indifference about slavery more than he hated the evil of slavery. We can understand his reasons for opposing Douglas’ effort at a statesmanly settlement as well as his reasons for not going further in an abolitionist direction only by attending to what he says about the monstrous injustice of slavery itself. His central argument against slavery is a very simple syllogism:

Premise 1: All human beings are equal, or possess equal rights, or possess rights to themselves.

Premise 2: Blacks are human beings.

Conclusion: Therefore, slavery of the blacks (or any human being) is unjust, because it is a denial of rights, a denial of the rights of self-ownership. Lincoln was no relativist, that is clear. He apparently did not believe that it was merely his “value judgment” that slavery was wrong – rather, he insisted, it is wrong, and a decent political society needs to recognize that. But Lincoln also knew that not everyone accepted his syllogism.

In particular, the first premise had become very controversial in his time. Equality of rights is, said Lincoln, “the sheet anchor of American republicanism,” and “the relation of masters and slaves ... a total violation of this principle;” yet Presidents like James Buchanan, Supreme Court Justices like Roger B. Taney, Senators like Calhoun, Pettit and now Douglas *deny* this principle, the House of Representatives sets up as a rule of its procedure that it will not receive or listen to any petitions protesting slavery. That is, the “sheet anchor” is torn, as Congress, the Supreme Court, and the President defect from it.

What then is Lincoln’s argument in favor of his first premise? As should be no surprise, this is a frequent theme in Lincoln’s speeches and writings. He made three chief arguments for universal equality of rights and against slavery. His first and probably most common argument was an argument from feeling: he tells his

³¹ See e.g. Speech at Ottawa, IL, August 21, 1858, Vol. 1, p. 514.

audience in 1854, “Your sense of justice and human sympathy continually tell you, that the poor negro has some natural right to himself.”³² Later, he says,

Repeal the Missouri compromise – repeal all compromises – repeal the Declaration of Independence – repeal all past history, you still cannot repeal human nature. It still will be the abundance of man’s heart, that slavery extension is wrong.³³

“It is certain,” Lincoln asserts, that “the general mass of mankind ... consider slavery a great moral wrong; and their feeling against it, is not evanescent, but eternal. It lies at the very foundation of their sense of justice.”³⁴ Nature, expressed in the universal or near universal promptings of the human heart, teaches that human beings are equal and that slavery is an abomination. But nature is not the only source of this knowledge. “My ancient faith teaches me that ‘all men are created equal,’ and that there can be no moral right in connection with one man’s making a slave of another.”³⁵ By his “ancient faith” Lincoln means, of course, the Declaration of Independence, a statement not universally known and delivered by the human heart in the natural feelings, but a matter of faith, delivered in a specifically American document. It is Lincoln’s or *our* faith, not the faith of mankind in general. Where Lincoln’s first argument appeals to universal nature, his second appeals to history, to a particular deliverance of *our* history. These two arguments, certainly not directly contradictory to each other, are nevertheless quite different. If universal human nature teaches through immediate feeling the truths about equal natural rights, then how comes it that specific traditions, histories or faiths with that same, or with different, content are either possible or necessary? To these two arguments Lincoln adds yet a third, very different from the others.

Where the others are in one form or another sub-rational arguments (feeling or faith), this is a rational argument: If A can prove, however conclusively, that he may, of right, enslave B – why may not B snatch the same argument, and prove equally that he may enslave A? – You say A is white and B is black. It is *color*, then; the lighter having the right to enslave the darker? Take care. By this rule, you are to be slave to the first man you meet, with a fairer skin than your own. You do not mean *color* exactly? – You mean whites are *intellectually* the superior of the blacks, and, therefore have the right to enslave them? Take care again. By this rule, you are to be slave to the first man you meet, with an intellect superior to your own. But, say you, it is a question of *interest*; and if you can make it your *interest*, you have the right to enslave another. Very well. And if he can make it his interest, he has the right to enslave you.³⁶

³² A. Lincoln, Speech at Peoria, IL, October 16, 1854, Vol. 1, p. 327.

³³ *Ibidem*, p. 346.

³⁴ *Ibidem*.

³⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 328.

³⁶ A. Lincoln, “Fragments on Slavery,” Vol. 1, p. 303.

This is in a way a very simple argument, yet it is also a very powerful argument. It is what is known in contemporary moral and political philosophy as an “agent relative argument.” It begins with a claim I, each and every I, raise for myself. Whatever argument I might make to justify slavery for another would justify it for me, too. But I feel, I know in my bones, my own claim to freedom, that I am free and want to be free. I cannot help but see this and assert this claim for myself, and Lincoln’s reasoning makes me see that I cannot go on to affirm the slavery of another without endangering my own freedom. As Lincoln said in another place, “Although volume upon volume is written to prove slavery a very good thing, we never hear of the man who wishes to take the good of it, by *being a slave himself*.³⁷ Or, put even more simply, Lincoln said, “as I would not be a slave, so I would not be a master.”³⁸ This argument too contains an important premise rooted in feeling, and in this respect it is like Lincoln’s first argument. But there is an important difference: in the first argument, the so-called universal feeling is a direct revulsion against the enslavement of others; in this third argument it is a direct revulsion against slavery for oneself. Lincoln is on much solidier ground, and knows that he is, in affirming the universality of that latter feeling than the former.

After all, as he concedes, volumes have been written to justify the slavery of others, but none willingly chooses this state for himself. In a word, Lincoln’s third, or rational argument, is much better *as an argument*. As a matter of logic, as a matter of clear thinking, Lincoln proves that one can accept slavery for another only on pain of self-contradiction.

Yet Lincoln knows that the pain of self-contradiction is not the pain human beings normally consider most intolerable. He once sat down to consider the argument of “pro-slavery theology,” as put forth by the Rev. Frederick A. Ross of Alabama.³⁹ The sum of this theology, he concluded, is this: “Slavery is not universally *right*, nor yet universally wrong; it is better for some people to be slaves; and in such cases, it is the will of God that they be such.” Now when Lincoln’s slaveholding clergyman Dr. Ross comes to ask himself the question whether *his slave* should be a slave, he receives no direct and unambiguous answer from the Bible and certainly never bothers to ask his slaves their opinion.⁴⁰ The decision must rest with him. So, at last, it comes to this that Dr. Ross is to decide the question. And while he considers it, he sits in the shade, with gloves on his hands, and subsists on the bread [his slaves are] earning in the burning sun. If he decides that God wills [these slaves] free, he thereby has to walk out of the shade, throw off his gloves, and delve for his own bread. Will Dr. Ross be actuated by that perfect impartiality, which has ever been considered most favorable to correct decisions?⁴¹

³⁷ Idem, “Fragments on Government,” Vol. 1, p. 302.

³⁸ Idem, “On Slavery and Democracy,” Vol. 1, p. 484.

³⁹ F. A. Ross, “Slavery Ordained by God” (1857).

⁴⁰ Cf. J. P. Diggins, *The Lost Soul...*, p. 297.

⁴¹ A. Lincoln, “On Pro-Slavery Theology,” Vol. 1, p. 685.

The Rev. Ross is more willing to suffer the pain of contradiction than the pain of hard labor in the hot sun. Thus it is that rational argument is not so conclusive in practice as it is in theory. What makes a proposition true and what makes a proposition effective as a maxim of action are in fact quite different. *This* is the single most important truth about politics; this disparity sets *the task* for statesmanship – to make the true and good and right *also* the effective, or to bring those elements as close together as possible. This disjunctive/conjunctive relationship both holds politics and morality together *and* distinguishes them from one another. The task of bringing together the right and the effectual is what separates the moral philosopher (and the scholarly critic) from the political actor of the highest kind. No political actor in American history understood this truth more fully, and acted upon it more thoughtfully and creatively than Lincoln. Herein lie some of the reasons for our perception of depth in the man. Lincoln made three arguments against slavery: an argument from direct feeling, an argument from faith, an argument from reason. The argument from reason was true, but as such ineffective; the argument from feeling was effective so far as it was true, that is, so far as the feeling, the universal revulsion against slavery, was, in fact, felt. Reason ascertains truth; feeling prompts action. But the feeling against slavery for others is fragile. Lincoln knows perfectly well of many who held slaves without revulsion – Rev. Ross, for one. He also points to the change of opinion in recent times – people are coming to feel differently about slavery, less repelled by it; they are coming to feel with Senator Douglas that they “don’t care” about it in itself. Reasoning points to the truth of the anti-slavery position, but reasoning is ineffective without the support of feeling, and feeling is unreliable. It is too variable, too uncertain in itself: it needs to be formed, focused, and channeled. In this context, Lincoln’s other argument against slavery comes into its own: the argument from “our ancient faith”, that is, from the American consensus on the doctrines of the Declaration of Independence. The fragility of both reason and feeling point to the need to cultivate fundamental moral and political truth in the mode of faith. Like the ancient faith of God’s people, this is *our* ancient faith, our inheritance from *our* fathers. Lincoln preaches the universal and rational truth of freedom as the particularistic and sub-rational inheritance of this people and its history. Lincoln attempts to attach the reverence reserved for the most sacred and venerable things to the fundamental truths of political life. The task for Lincoln’s statesmanship is to transfer the place, although not the meaning, of the Declaration of Independence, to make it the object of a religious attachment, with the feelings, solidity, stability and awesomeness of religion.⁴²

The main theme of Lincoln’s career is just this translation of the Biblical faith into this new political religion. He took the truths of John Locke and Thomas Jefferson, two men of the enlightenment, who thought that rational argument plus self-interest would suffice to produce a decent and true political order, and infused their truths with the spirit of religion and poetry. Now it should be clear why Lincoln saw

⁴² Thus I disagree strongly with the argument in H. V. Jaffa, *Crisis...*, p. 317–329.

that he had to counter the admittedly statesmanly accommodation Stephen Douglas was attempting to sell the nation. Douglas' solution might gain some temporary political peace (although events in Kansas rendered even that proposition questionable), but even if it did, it would endanger the conditions for future political health, for it would further wean the nation away from its ancient faith, from its unreflective belief and feelings in favor of equality of rights and freedom. Worse than the existence of slavery itself, in other words, is the spreading of the view that slavery is a matter of indifference, that the nation can and should be neutral, that the Declaration of Independence has no bearing on the question. In one of his most forceful statements from the period of the Lincoln-Douglas debates, Lincoln made superlatively clear just what his priorities were: Think nothing of me – take no thought for the political fate of any man whomsoever – but come back to the truths that are in the declaration of Independence. You may do anything with me you choose, if you will but heed these sacred principles. You may not only defeat me in the Senate, but you may take me and put me to death. While pretending no indifference to earthly honors, I do claim to be activated in this contest by something higher than anxiety for office. I charge you to drop every paltry and insignificant thought for any man's success. It is nothing; I am nothing; Judge Douglas is nothing. *But do not destroy that immortal emblem of Humanity – the Declaration of Independence.*⁴³

So long as the moral evil of slavery is reaffirmed, so long as the ancient faith is kept alive, then, Lincoln believed, one could rest secure in the belief that the evil would be abolished from the land in the course of time. "Where there is a will, there is a way" – even if Lincoln admittedly did not see clearly what that way was. Lincoln knew that his intransigence carried risks, the risks that the historians have spoken of, but he thought the alternative much worse, for, as he emphasized, the moral consensus that condemned slavery was the consensus that supported any form of freedom. The moral indifference that Douglas sought could not sustain a free society. To complete a quotation presented earlier: "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."⁴⁴ The argument of Douglas, Lincoln said in Chicago,

[I]s the same old serpent that says you work and I eat, you toil and I will enjoy the fruits of it. Turn it whatever way you will – whether it comes from the mouth of a King, an excuse for enslaving the people of his country, or from the mouths of men of one race as a reason for enslaving the men of another race, it is all the same old serpent, and I hold that if that course of argumentation that is made for convincing the public mind that we should not care about this, should be granted, it does not stop with the Negro.⁴⁵

⁴³ A. Lincoln, Speech at Lewiston, IL, August 17, 1858, reprinted in: *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. R. P. Baske, New Brunswick 1953, Vol. 2, p. 547.

⁴⁴ A. Lincoln, "On Slavery and Democracy," Vol. 1, p. 404.

⁴⁵ Idem, Speech at Chicago, IL, July 10, 1858, Vol. 1, p. 457.

He knew also that the disparity between what is true and what is effective meant that at any moment the one who understands the relation between morality and politics properly must always settle for less than morality demands, but must always keep the moral principle alive so that another statesman, another day, might aim at another, a more far-reaching conjunction between the moral truth and politically efficacious feeling.⁴⁶ This task is different in detail for us than it was for him, but in form it is just the same. Herein, I think, lies also the response to the neo-abolitionist criticism of Lincoln characteristic of his late twentieth-century critics. Lincoln, it is said, took a stand on the peripheral question of the extension of slavery, but did nothing about the more fundamental issue of the existence of slavery itself. Indeed, he reiterated his unwillingness to do anything about slavery where it existed at least as often as Douglas told audiences he “didn’t care” which way slavery was voted in the territories. There was nothing Lincoln wanted to be known less as than an abolitionist or an integrationist. Lincoln, the newer critics say, was lukewarm on slavery and as much a racist as his political opponents. Lincoln’s understanding of the necessities and highest tasks of statesmanship stand as a sufficient response to these concerns. The task, recall, is to bring the right and efficacious as near to each other as possible. The moralist can ignore the efficacious and look only to the right.

The Machiavellian can look only to the efficacious and ignore the right, but the statesman has the luxury of neither the one sort of irresponsible moral purity nor the other sort of irresponsible pragmatic efficaciousness. Although Lincoln opposed slavery, the evil itself, as much as the most intransigent of the abolitionists, he would not, he could not, give up the other half, the need for efficaciousness on behalf of the good, and remain true to his vocation. Given the state of public opinion and the configuration of political forces in the U.S. of the 1850’s, no one pressing an abolitionist agenda could gain enough political power to achieve even the modest anti-slavery gains Lincoln and his fellow free-soil Republicans sought. Certainly Lincoln would not be living up to either side of the statesman’s task if he accepted the formula of the Garrisonian abolitionists: “no union with slaveholders.” To separate from the slave-holding parts of the union would allow a higher degree of moral purity, perhaps, and it would withdraw from the slave system whatever benefit the union supplied (including enforcement of the fugitive slave act), but it would free no slaves, and only tendentious reasoning can believe that slavery would be more vulnerable in a separate Southern Confederacy than in a Lincolnian union.

Moreover, the issue of right is itself complex. Attempting to allay the fears inspired by his accession to the Presidency, Lincoln addressed the South in his First

⁴⁶ Cf. the quite contrary view of Lincoln’s most recent distinguished biographer: “the controversy over whether the framers of the Declaration of Independence intended to include blacks in announcing that all men are created equal dealt with the interesting, if ultimately unresolvable, historiographical problem, but it was not easy to see just what it had to do with the choice of a senator for Illinois in 1858.” D. H. Donald, *Lincoln*..., p. 226.

Inaugural Address: Apprehension seems to exist among the people of the Southern States, that by the accession of a Republican administration, their property, and their peace, and personal security, are to be endangered. There never has been any reasonable cause for such apprehension . . . I have no purpose, directly or indirectly, to interfere with the institution of slavery in the states where it exists. I believe I have no lawful right to do so.⁴⁷

The issue of political right is, in another sense than heretofore described, different and more complex than the issue of moral right. Although Lincoln never tired of saying that slavery is a moral wrong, he did not believe that that fact alone gave him the moral right to act as a member of the government of the union against it. The principles of moral right contain as a subset principles of political authority. Political authorities are not (in constitutional systems) merely authorized to do whatever to them seems morally right. They are authorized to deploy the coercive power of the state apparatus under authorizing mandates – constitutions or other fundamental laws. Rightful political action requires the conjunction of moral right and political authority. It is the latter that Lincoln knew that he lacked; to act on behalf of the moral right against the mandates of authority would itself be a wrong. This melancholy conclusion is but another manifestation, or reflection of the more fundamental distinction between the right and the effectual. The task is to bring the right and authority as close together as possible. But one can no more ignore the one than the other. Lincoln's stance, of all those visible in that tempestuous era, was the one that remained most true to all the imperatives of political right. I can do no better than to close out my thinkin' about Lincoln by quoting from his magnificent speech against the Supreme Court's shameful decision in the Dred Scot case.

The framers of the Declaration of Independence defined with tolerable distinctness in what respects they did consider all men created equal – equal in certain inalienable rights . . . this they said and this they meant. They did not mean to assert the obvious untruth, that all men were then enjoying that equality, nor yet, that they were about to confer it immediately upon them. In fact they had no power to confer such a boon. They meant simply to declare the *right*, so that *enforcement* of it might follow as fast as circumstances should permit. They meant to set up a standard maxim for free society, which could be familiar to all, and revered by all; constantly looked up to, constantly labored for, 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.⁴⁸

To put Lincoln's point into the terms of a more recent discussion: there is no end of history. The political good is transcendent, progressive, and unfolding. No statesman or people can achieve it all. The proper standard for judging a statesman is not whether he or she attains the unattainable, but whether he or she does

⁴⁷ A. Lincoln, "First Inaugural Address," Vol. 2, p. 215.

⁴⁸ Idem, "Speech on Dred Scott Decision," Vol. 1, p. 398.

the good achievable in the circumstances and leaves open the possibility for doing more in the future. Where Douglas would buy peace, a present good, at the expense of the future, Lincoln risks war for the sake of both present good and future possibility. Lincoln renewed his nation's awareness of "the standard maxim" of political right and therein kept open the door to further achievement of political right. He did his part. He reminds us that it always remains our task to do ours.