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Cover Page Footnote

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ABRAHAM LINCOLN: THOUGHTS ON SLAVERY AND RACIAL EQUALITY

By Abraham Scotfield

ABSTRACT— Looking at the political thought of Abraham Lincoln, two major themes arise: slavery and racial equality. Development of his thought on these subjects spanned his entire life and is revealed through his speeches, public statements, and written works. With the sheer amount of thought that Lincoln dedicated to these subjects, it can be difficult to decipher where he truly stood on these issues. To come to a more concrete understanding of Lincoln's thought regarding these subjects, this article offers multiple interpretations of each of these themes. Concerning Lincoln's thought on slavery, three interpretations arise: the Anti-Expansion interpretation, the Moral Opposition interpretation, and the Union First interpretation. Concerning his thought on racial equality, two interpretations arise: the Expansion interpretation and Restriction interpretation.

Keywords: Abraham Lincoln, Slavery, Racial equality, American political thought

I. INTRODUCTION

Abraham Lincoln is one of the most prominent political thinkers in American history.

Throughout his political career, he developed political thought on a diverse array of topics ranging from slavery and racial equality to federalism and economics. While he did make substantive contributions in all of those areas, his thought focused on slavery and racial equality had the most significant impact. These two subjects rose to the forefront of Lincoln's era and emerged as two major themes in his political thought. For both of these themes his thought did not remain static but rather developed over time creating the possibility of many interpretations of his views on these subjects.

Three main interpretations arise concerning Lincoln's thought on slavery. First, the *Anti-Expansion* interpretation which asserts that at the very least Lincoln was firmly opposed to the expansion of slavery into the new territories and argued that the federal government had the

authority to prohibit such an expansion. Second, the *Moral Opposition* interpretation which holds that while Lincoln morally opposed the institution of slavery, he did not demonstrate the ideology of an abolitionist. Third, the *Union First* interpretation which asserts that while Lincoln did seemingly oppose the institution of slavery his goal of preserving the Union took precedence over his ideological views. Here we see a pragmatic interpretation as he was willing to adopt a number of stances to achieve his goal.

Concerning Lincoln's thought on racial equality two main interpretations arise. First, the *Expansion* interpretation which contends that to some extent Lincoln was in favor of the expansion of equality for Black Americans as he argued for the equal access to the natural rights spelled out in the Declaration of Independence. Second, the *Restriction* interpretation which holds that Lincoln also advocated for the restriction of racial equality with the denial of civil and political rights to Black Americans. Here we see some tensions begin to emerge in Lincoln's political thought as he seems to simultaneously support the expansion and restriction of racial equality.

Slavery Theme

To begin, we will look at Lincoln's thought regarding the subject of slavery. First, in order to contextualize his thought on the subject it is useful to explore the state of American politics regarding slavery at his time. During Lincoln's era, slavery became the foremost political issue in the United States. It was the source of immense political tension that ultimately split the country creating the North-South divide. This saw the North advocating anti-slavery sentiments and the South advocating pro-slavery sentiments. This division fostered much disagreement on the future of slavery and the appropriate actions to take regarding it.

Within this context of immense tension and division on the subject, Lincoln's political thought emerges. His thought on the subject did not remain stagnant; over time he expressed many views on the topic. He began with advocating an anti-expansionist position which we see in many of his speeches including the Cooper Union Address and the Peoria Speech. Here he thought the institution of slavery should be confined to the South and prohibited from spreading into the new territories. Then, in both public and in private, he expressed moral opposition to the institution in his Second Inaugural Address and his letter to Albert Hodges. Here we see that regardless of what action he thought he could legitimately take against the institution, he thought slavery was immoral. Finally, as the Civil War broke out, Lincoln began to take a more pragmatic stance on the subject that we see in his letter to Horace Greeley, the Emancipation Proclamation, and his Annual Message to Congress in 1862. Here we see that as his priority became the preservation of the Union, Lincoln was willing to adopt many stances on slavery to achieve this goal.

II. ANTI-EXPANSION INTERPRETATION

Looking at the political thought of Lincoln regarding slavery it seems that at the very least we can interpret him as advocating for the confinement of the institution to the South and opposing its expansion into the territories. Not only did Lincoln ideologically oppose its expansion, he thought the federal government had the authority to enact and enforce such a prohibition.

Lincoln began to express this anti-expansionist position in his Peoria Speech in which he explained his objections to the Kansas-Nebraska Act. At the beginning of this speech, he draws an important distinction saying, "I wish to make and to keep the distinction between the existing institution, and the extension of it" (Lincoln). Here we see Lincoln distinguish between the

concept of the existing institution of slavery and the concept of its expansion to emphasize that he does not wish to interfere with the current institution but rather the expansion of it into the territories. This provides an initial framework for his viewpoint from which he advocates for the prohibition of the expansion of slavery but not the current institution that exists in the South.

As Lincoln moves on into the speech, he delves into his own action while a member of the House of Representatives which demonstrates his anti-expansionist position. Following the United States' war with Mexico a peace treaty was negotiated in which the U.S. acquired new territory. To determine the expansion of slavery into these new territories members of the House proposed that the Missouri line simply extend to the Pacific Ocean which would allow territories below the line to become slave states and territories above the line to become free states. Lincoln explains that he voted this proposition down as he was committed to having all of the newly acquired territories be free of slavery (Lincoln). We see here that Lincoln was in opposition of the expansion of slavery into the new territories. Ultimately, this speech clearly demonstrates that Lincoln opposed the expansion of slavery, but not the existing institution, which justifies the interpretation of his political thought regarding slavery as anti-expansionist.

Lincoln continued to advocate for his anti-expansionist position in his Cooper Union Address in which he argued that Congress has the power to regulate slavery in the territories which would allow the expansion of it to be prohibited. Within this speech, Lincoln argues that at least 21 signers of the Constitution thought that Congress should have the ability to control slavery within the territories rather than allowing it to expand. Lincoln states that “twenty-one – a clear majority of the whole – certainly understood that no proper division of local from federal authority, nor any part of the Constitution, forbade the Federal Government to control slavery in the federal territories” (Lincoln). Here Lincoln appeals to the Founding Fathers to legitimize his

own position on the expansion of slavery and demonstrate that the federal government does in fact have the ability to control slavery in the territories rather than let it expand. Again, this speech demonstrates that Lincoln consistently advocated for the prohibition of the expansion of slavery into the territories. Moreover, using this argumentation to prove that Congress does have the power to restrict the expansion of slavery further demonstrates Lincoln as an anti-expansionist because this would allow for the legitimate enactment of this prohibition.

Furthermore, this interpretation of Lincoln as an anti-expansionist is reaffirmed in Michael Les Benedict's article "Abraham Lincoln and Federalism" in which he discusses Lincoln's position on slavery and the federal system. He explains that as Lincoln became an increasingly prominent member of the Republican party, he "was central in presenting to the voters the Republican position on slavery and the federal system" which contended that the federal government should and had the authority to regulate slavery in the territories (Benedict 28). Here we see that Lincoln was instrumental in communicating this anti-expansionist message on a national level. His convictions were not merely personal ideologies that he kept to himself but rather a message he consistently communicated to the nation. Moreover, Benedict highlights that Lincoln "believed that the Constitution delegated the national government the power to regulate slavery in the District of Columbia and the territories" (Benedict 29). Again, we see Lincoln's commitment to the prohibition of the expansion of slavery into the territories which further confirms an anti-expansionist interpretation of Lincoln's political thought.

III. MORAL OPPOSITION INTERPRETATION

While Lincoln did clearly express anti-expansionist sentiments throughout his political career, he also communicated moral opposition to the institution in public and private. He argued that

slavery was immoral both on secular and theological grounds, yet he did not demonstrate the qualities of an abolitionist as he did not advocate for the immediate removal of the institution.

We begin to see this moral opposition expressed in a letter Lincoln wrote to Albert G. Hodges in which he describes the power of the Presidency regarding slavery. In the letter Lincoln writes “I am naturally anti-slavery. If slavery is not wrong, nothing is wrong. I can not remember when I did not so think, and feel” (Lincoln). Here we see Lincoln make an explicit statement of moral opposition to the institution of slavery. In fact, it seems he regards it as an ultimate wrong in that if slavery were to be considered moral then any action or institution could be morally justified. In making this appeal it seems at least to some extent that Lincoln bases his opposition on secular grounds as he employs logic to demonstrate slavery’s immorality. Nonetheless, this unambiguous statement clearly justifies the interpretation that Lincoln was morally opposed to slavery.

However, even with his consistent moral opposition, Lincoln does not constitute an abolitionist as he does not advocate for the immediate removal of slavery nor does he think he has the power to enact such an abolition as President. Further in the letter Lincoln writes, “And yet I have never understood that the Presidency conferred upon me an unrestricted right to act officially upon this judgment and feeling” (Lincoln). Lincoln’s interpretation of the Constitution and the powers of the Presidency led him to believe that no such power existed that would allow him to totally and immediately abolish slavery. With expressing this sentiment, even considering his clear moral opposition, he cannot be viewed as an abolitionist because he does not advocate for the institution’s immediate removal.

We continue to see Lincoln express moral opposition in his Second Inaugural Address during which he discusses the condition of the United States in light of the Civil War. In his

discussion of slavery being the root cause of the conflict, he mentions that “It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces” (Lincoln). Here Lincoln begins to employ theological appeals to justify moral opposition to slavery. He argues that calling for God’s assistance to exploit, enslave, and deny liberty to fellow human beings is a sin. This denial of freedom and the highly exploitative nature of the institution constitute violations of Christian moral code, therefore making the practice immoral. Moreover, while discussing offenses that God has set forth he states “we shall suppose that American Slavery is one of those offences which, in the providence of God, must needs come, but which, having continued through His appointed time, He now wills to remove” (Lincoln). Here Lincoln appeals directly to God and argues that he has bestowed humanity with a moral obligation to rectify the moral injustice of slavery. Again, we clearly see Lincoln morally opposed to the institution of slavery even going as far as to demonstrate that God himself has deemed it a moral wrong. Ultimately, this address justifies the interpretation that Lincoln was morally opposed to slavery.

Furthermore, we see this interpretation of Lincoln’s political thought affirmed in Allen C. Guelzo’s article “Lincoln, Race and Slavery: A Biographical Overview” in which he discusses the many viewpoints Lincoln expressed regarding slavery. In his discussion, Guelzo mentions that Lincoln believed slavery was contrary to both “natural law and America’s republican ideology” making it “inconceivable to him that slavery could endure permanently in the United States” (Guelzo 14). Here Lincoln views slavery in violation of both natural law and American ideology as life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness are being totally denied to enslaved individuals. Under any circumstances the denial of these natural rights as immoral further demonstrating Lincoln’s moral opposition to slavery.

IV. UNION FIRST INTERPRETATION

For the last interpretation of Lincoln's political thought regarding slavery we will look at how he prioritized the preservation of the Union which made him willing to pursue whatever action on the subject that would allow him to achieve this end. While Lincoln did ultimately advocate for and enact partial emancipation to preserve the Union, many positions were considered to accomplish his goal.

We begin to see this Union First perspective take form in a letter Lincoln wrote to Horace Greely in which he expresses a willingness to adopt a number of positions on slavery, so long as they would help to bring an end to the Civil War. In this letter we see Lincoln most clearly advocate for this Union First perspective when he writes:

If there be those who would not save the Union, unless they could at the same time save slavery, I do not agree with them. If there be those who would not save the Union unless they could at the same time destroy slavery, I do not agree with them. My paramount object in this struggle is to save the Union, and is not either to save or to destroy slavery. If I could save the Union without freeing any slave I would do it, and if I could save it by freeing all the slaves I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone I would also do that. What I do about slavery, and the colored race, I do because I believe it helps to save the Union; and what I forbear, I forbear because I do not believe it would help to save the Union (Lincoln).

Lincoln was firmly committed to saving the Union and he expressed the sentiment that he was willing to do anything regarding slavery as a means of doing so. As we see he explicitly states that if it would help save the Union, he would free none of the slaves, free all of the slaves, or free some and not others. While he did express anti-expansionist and moral oppositionist sentiments in his ideological thought, it ultimately seems that whatever action he took on slavery was determined only as a means of preserving the Union.

Furthermore, this Union First perspective is seen in the juxtaposition between Lincoln's Address to Congress in 1862 and the Emancipation Proclamation. In these respective documents it seems Lincoln advocates for different approaches to slavery in order to end the war and preserve the Union. In the Address to Congress Lincoln argues that "giving freedom to the slave" if enacted would "shorten the war" and "restore the national authority and national prosperity" (Lincoln). In this address it seems Lincoln argues for total emancipation as a means to preserve the Union. We see this in how he argues for emancipation without specifying particular groups that will be freed and groups that will not implying that he was advocating for total emancipation.

However, in the Emancipation Proclamation Lincoln does employ the strategy of freeing some slaves and not others. He declares that all individuals held as slaves "within any State or designated part of a State, the people whereof shall then be in rebellion against the United States, shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free" (Lincoln). Here he specifies that only slaves within states that are engaged in active rebellion will be freed. Thus, slaves residing in Union controlled territory would not be emancipated which is contrary to the position he advocated for in his Address to Congress. Advocating for multiple positions in order to preserve the Union demonstrates that Lincoln's political thought can be justifiably interpreted as a Union First perspective where he was willing to adopt a number of positions on slavery in order to preserve the Union.

Racial Equality Theme

Next, we will look at Lincoln's thought regarding racial equality and the extent to which he advocated for its expansion and restriction. In this theme we begin to see some tensions emerge

in Lincoln's thought as he seemingly expressed contradictory views on the subject which we will explore later in the section. Similar to the topic of slavery this theme created much tension and division within the country as a myriad of perspectives were expressed.

Again, Lincoln's political thought regarding the subject emerges out of a political landscape defined by fierce division. On one hand, it seems Lincoln argues for the expansion of racial equality in his Speech on the Dred Scott Decision and a speech he gave at a Republican banquet. Here he advocates that Black Americans should be guaranteed equality in their natural rights. On the other hand, it seems Lincoln argues for the restriction of racial equality in his fourth debate with Stephen A. Douglas and an address on colonization. Here Lincoln argues that that equality in civil and political rights should be restricted from Black Americans and even goes as far to advocate for their removal from society to be used as a tool of colonization.

V. EXPANSION INTERPRETATION

Looking at Lincoln's political thought, it seems to some extent that he advocates for the expansion of racial equality. He believed that all individuals are equal in their natural rights and sought to extend this equality to enslaved peoples.

We begin to see Lincoln advocate for such an expansion in his Speech on the Dred Scott Decision in which he argues that the rights spelled out in the Declaration of Independence apply to all men and not just Whites. Lincoln argues that the equality proclaimed in the Declaration was "intended to include all men" in their right to life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness (Lincoln). Here Lincoln argues for the expanded application of the Declaration which would allow its proclamation of equality in natural rights to apply to members of all races within the United States. In arguing for this interpretation of the Declaration, Lincoln advocated for the

expansion of racial equality as truly “all men” would be guaranteed their natural rights. Moreover, Lincoln rejected a restrictive reading of the Declaration as this would imply that “not only negroes but white people outside of Great Britain and America are not spoken of in that instrument” (Lincoln). Rather, he thought “the Declaration contemplated the progressive improvement in the condition of all men everywhere” (Lincoln). Here Lincoln contends that framing the Declaration in a restrictive manner would disallow its application to many individuals who already enjoy the protection of their natural rights under it. Instead, he argues that as American society evolves a progressive approach should be taken in regard to the Declaration to ensure that its promise of equality is realized for everyone. This demonstrates that to some extent Lincoln can be interpreted as advocating for the expansion of racial equality.

Furthermore, Lincoln expressed this idea of expanded racial equality in a speech he gave at a Republican banquet. In his remarks, he states that “We shall again be able not to declare, that ‘all States as States, are equal,’ nor yet that ‘all citizens as citizens are equal,’ but to renew the broader, better declaration, including both these and much more, that ‘all men are created equal’” (Lincoln). We see again that Lincoln’s commitment is for an expanded interpretation of who is included in the statement “all men are created equal.” He advocates for the position that Black men and not just White men should be included in this statement and afforded equality in their natural rights. This speech further demonstrates that Lincoln advocated for the expansion of racial equality justifying an expansionist interpretation of his thought.

This interpretation of Lincoln is affirmed in Lowell H. Harrison’s article “Lincoln, Slavery, and Kentucky” in which he discusses Lincoln’s attitudes toward slavery and race. In Harrison’s discussion, he mentions that Lincoln “insisted that [Blacks] did have the same natural rights stated in the Declaration of Independence” (Harrison 572). Again, we see that Lincoln

consistently advocated for the expansion of racial equality at least in regard to the natural rights contained within the Declaration. However, as we will see in the next interpretation, Lincoln also seems to argue the opposite – that racial equality should be restricted in some manner.

VI. RESTRICTION INTERPRETATION

While Lincoln does advocate for the expansion of the equality in natural rights, it seems he simultaneously supports the restriction of equality in supporting the denial of civil and political rights to racial minorities. This contradiction highlights some tension within his political thought that can make it difficult to pinpoint where Lincoln truly stands on the issue of racial equality.

We begin to see this restrictive perspective emerge in Lincoln's fourth debate with Stephen A. Douglas in which he explains his perspective on race. In responding to Douglas's claim that he favored racial equality, Lincoln makes an unequivocal statement in which denies any such support.

I will say then that I am not, nor ever have been, in favor of bringing about in any way the social and political equality of the white and black races, that I am not nor ever have been in favor of making voters or jurors of negroes, nor of qualifying them to hold office, nor to intermarry with white people; and I will say in addition to this that there is a physical difference between the white and black races which I believe will forever forbid the two races living together on terms of social and political equality (Lincoln).

This statement demonstrates unambiguously that Lincoln opposes racial equality in regard to social and political rights. He explicitly states that Black Americans should be denied this equality and the opportunity to participate in government through voting or holding public office. Moreover, he even goes as far to claim that there is not only an ideological difference but a physical difference between Whites and Blacks that would disallow the two races from existing in an equal society. This single statement alone seems to be conclusive evidence that Lincoln did

not support social and political racial equality and sought to restrict the enactment of any such equality.

We continue to see Lincoln advocate for this restriction of equality in an address he gave on colonization in which he advocates for the removal of Black Americans from society. To begin his remarks, he states that “even when you cease to be slaves, you are yet far removed from being placed on an equality with the white race” (Lincoln). Here Lincoln reinforces his opposition to racial equality. He suggests that even as former slaves secure equality in natural rights they are still inferior to the White race and therefore undeserving of civil or political equality. Moving on in the address, Lincoln argues that considering this inferiority Black Americans should be removed from society. He advocates that “It is better for us both, therefore, to be separated” and proposes a plan to send Black Americans to a colony in Central America. (Lincoln). Here it seems Lincoln was so committed to the restriction of civil and political rights that he would rather remove Black Americans from society altogether than offer equality. Again, this justifies interpreting Lincoln as having a restrictive perspective on racial equality.

VII. CONCLUSION

Throughout Lincoln’s political thought we see two major themes emerge: slavery and racial equality. Looking at his thought regarding slavery three main interpretations arise. The *Anti-Expansion* interpretation finds that, at the very least, Lincoln wanted to restrict the expansion of slavery into the territories. The *Moral Opposition* interpretation finds that he was morally opposed the institution. The *Union First* interpretation finds that considering Lincoln’s priority of preserving the Union he was willing to adopt a number of positions on slavery to accomplish this goal.

These multiple interpretations of Lincoln seem to challenge many popular conceptions of Lincoln's thought and work regarding slavery. Often times Lincoln is presented as the "Great American Emancipator" that worked tirelessly to rid the United States of the injustice of slavery. In execution of this project, his intent regarding emancipation is often solely presented as moral opposition to the institution. These interpretations, however, reveal that while this popular conception does hold some truth about Lincoln's thought, it does not tell the whole story. Lincoln's thought on the subject was far more complicated. While Lincoln was morally opposed to the institution, he used emancipation as a tool to preserve the Union and win the Civil War. His moral opposition never seemed to motivate Lincoln's action as he was content in allowing the continuation of slavery in the South. The only action it seems he truly advocated for was the restriction of its expansion into the territories not emancipation. Emancipation was only ever used as a means to an end, and it does not seem Lincoln would have done so if the Civil War had not begun. Moreover, the emancipation he ultimately enacted was limited and not total as popular conceptions may suggest. While these interpretations do represent Lincoln's thought on slavery more accurately – as his thought was diverse and varied – he still played a major role in the abolition of slavery. His prosecution of the Civil War led the country down a path that allowed for the passing of the 13th Amendment. Was Lincoln this great emancipator, motivated purely by morality? These interpretations seem to suggest that he was not; his thought and work regarding slavery was not as straightforward as many popular interpretations propose.

Looking at Lincoln's thought on racial equality, we see two main interpretations arise. First being the *Expansion* interpretation which finds that to some extent Lincoln supported the expansion of racial equality. Second, the *Restriction* interpretation which finds that Lincoln simultaneously supported the restriction of racial equality.

Similarly, these interpretations demonstrate that many popular conceptions of Lincoln's thought and work on racial equality offer an oversimplified description. Considering that he is often viewed as being this great emancipator he is thought of as being a champion of racial equality and progress. Again, these interpretations demonstrate that this popular conception of Lincoln does bear some truth but does not totally encapsulate his thought. Lincoln advocated for the equality in natural rights for Black Americans. This reveals that to some extent he did support racial equality. However, he also sought to restrict racial equality based upon the idea of inferiority. Lincoln thought that Black Americans should be denied civil and political equality. This demonstrates that while Lincoln did advocate for the expansion of natural rights, he was still entrenched in many of the racist notions of the time. This support for both the expansion and restriction of racial equality initially seems like an obvious contradiction within Lincoln's thought. However, his thoughts on expansion solely regarded natural rights, and his thoughts on restriction solely regarded civil and political rights. This reveals that while there is some tension within his thought it does not constitute an outright contradiction. These interpretations challenge the simplistic presentation of Lincoln's thought, but, in some ways, Lincoln's work on the expansion of natural rights for Black Americans allowed for future progress regarding greater equality for racial minorities. Was Lincoln the champion of racial equality and progress that he is often made out to be? These interpretations seem to suggest that he was not as while he did support the expansion of natural rights, he also sought to restrict civil and political equality from Black Americans.

Ultimately, these interpretations of these themes of Lincoln's thought demonstrate that he was a complex thinker whose thought developed over time. No single interpretation or conceptualization of Lincoln would be sufficient to accurately represent his perspectives.

Therefore, it is necessary to develop multiple interpretations to fully encapsulate Lincoln's thought.

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