

# Lincoln and the Abolitionists

History records Abraham Lincoln as the Great Emancipator, yet ardent abolitionists of his day such as William Lloyd Garrison viewed him with deep suspicion.

That the 16th president eventually achieved the abolitionists' most cherished dream, says biographer Allen Guelzo, happened through a curious combination of political maneuvering, personal conviction, and commitment to constitutional principle.

*by Allen C. Guelzo*

One of the ironies of the Civil War era and the end of slavery in the United States has always been that the man who played the role of the Great Emancipator was so hugely mistrusted and so energetically vilified by the party of abolition. Abraham Lincoln, whatever his larger reputation as the liberator of two million black slaves, has never entirely shaken off the imputation that he was something of a half-heart about it. “There is a counter-legend of Lincoln,” acknowledges historian Stephen B. Oates, “one shared ironically enough by many white southerners and certain black Americans of our time” who are convinced that Lincoln never intended to abolish slavery—that he “was a bigot . . . a white racist who championed segregation, opposed civil and political rights for black people” and “wanted them all thrown out of the country.” That reputation is still linked to the 19th-century denunciations of Lincoln issued by the abolitionist vanguard.

It has been the task of biographers ever since to deplore that image of Lincoln as the sort of extremist rhetoric that abolitionism was generally renowned for; or to insist that Lincoln may have had elements of racism in him but that he gradually effaced them as he moved on his “journey” to emancipation; or to suggest that Lincoln was an abolitionist all along who dragged his feet over emancipation for pragmatic political reasons.

Still, not even the most vigorous apologists for Lincoln can entirely escape the sense of distance between the Emancipator and the abolitionists. Indeed, they underestimate that distance, for the differences the abolition-



*Matthew Brady took this photograph of Abraham Lincoln in 1862. A contemporary observer, Colonel Theodore Lyman, remarked that Lincoln “has the look of sense and wonderful shrewdness, while the heavy eyelids give him a mark almost of genius.”*

ists saw between themselves and Lincoln were not illusory or mere matters of timing and policy. They involved not just quarrels about strategies and timetables, but some genuinely unbridgeable cultural divides. Only when those differences are allowed their full play can we begin to recognize Lincoln’s real place in the story of slavery’s end. And only when those differences are not nudged aside can we see clearly the question Lincoln poses to the fundamental assumptions of American reform movements, which have drawn strength from the abolitionist example, rather than Lincoln’s, ever since.

That the abolitionists disliked Lincoln almost unanimously cannot be in much doubt. They themselves said it too often, beginning as early as the mid-1850s, when Illinois abolitionists regarded Lincoln as a suspect recruit to the antislavery cause. The suspicions only deepened from the moment he stepped into the national spotlight as the Republican candidate for the presidency in 1860. Charles Grandison Finney, the Protestant evangelical theologian and president of Oberlin College, the nation's abolitionist hotbed, scored Lincoln in the first issue of the *Oberlin Evangelist* to appear after the nominating convention:

The Republican Convention at Chicago [has] put in nomination for President Abraham Lincoln of Illinois, a gentleman who became widely known a year and a half ago by his political footrace against S.A. Douglas for the place of United States Senate from their state. In that campaign he won laurels on the score of his intellectual ability and forensic powers; but if our recollection is not at fault, his ground on the score of humanity towards the oppressed race was too low.

In the eyes of black abolitionist H. Ford Douglass, Lincoln's stature showed no improvement during the 1860 presidential campaign:

I do not believe in the anti-slavery of Abraham Lincoln. . . . Two years ago, I went through the State of Illinois for the purpose of getting signers to a petition, asking the Legislature to repeal the "Testimony Law," so as to permit colored men to testify against white men. I went to prominent Republicans, and among others, to Abraham Lincoln and Lyman Trumbull, and neither of them dared to sign that petition, to give me the right to testify in a court of justice! . . . If we sent our children to school, Abraham Lincoln would kick them out, in the name of Republicanism and anti-slavery!

Lincoln's election did not mute abolitionist criticism. His unwillingness to use the outbreak of the Civil War in the spring of 1861 as a pretext for immediate abolition convinced William Lloyd Garrison that Lincoln was "unwittingly helping to prolong the war, and to render the result more and more doubtful! If he *is* 6 feet 4 inches high, he is only a dwarf in mind!" Garrison had never really believed that Lincoln's Republicans "had an issue with the South," and Lincoln himself did nothing once elected to convince him otherwise. Frederick Douglass, who had parted fellowship with Garrison over the issue of noninvolvement in politics, hoped for better from Lincoln, but only seemed to get more disappointments. Lincoln's presidential inaugural, with its promise not to interfere with southern slavery if the southern states attempted no violent withdrawal from the Union, left Douglass with "no very hopeful impres-

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*The abolitionist John Brown is shown in this 1863 Currier & Ives lithograph on the way to his execution in 1859 for murder and treason, an event that galvanized the abolitionist movement.*

sion” of Lincoln. If anything, Lincoln had only confirmed Douglass’s “worst fears,” and he flayed Lincoln as “an itinerant Colonization lecturer, showing all his inconsistencies, his pride of race and blood, his contempt for Negroes, and his canting hypocrisy.”

**E**ven in Lincoln’s Congress, Republican abolitionists—such as Zachariah Chandler, Henry Wilson, Benjamin Wade, George W. Julian, James Ashley, Thaddeus Stevens, and Charles Sumner—all heaped opprobrium on Lincoln’s head. Wade, according to Ohio lawyer and congressman Joshua Giddings, “denounced the President as a *failure* from the moment of his election.” It mattered nothing to Wade if the war “con-

tinues 30 years and bankrupts the whole nation” unless “we can say there is not a slave in this land,” but he could not convince Lincoln of that. “Lincoln himself seems to have no *nerve* or decision in dealing with great issues,” wrote Ohio Congressman William Parker Cutler in his diary. And even the middle-of-the-road Maine senator William Pitt Fessenden erupted, “If the President had his wife’s *will* and would use it rightly, our affairs would look much better.” Sometimes, the attacks were so biting that Lincoln (in a comment to his attorney general, the Missourian Edward Bates) found the radical Republicans “almost fiendish.” “Stevens, Sumner, and Wilson simply haunt me with the importunities for a Proclamation of Emancipation,” Lincoln complained to Missouri senator John B. Henderson. “Wherever I go and whatever way I turn, they are on my trail.”

**N**one of the abolitionists, however, were more vituperative in their contempt for Lincoln than the Boston patrician Wendell Phillips. A self-professed “Jeffersonian democrat in the darkest hour,” Phillips was disposed from the start to suspect anyone like Lincoln, who had belonged to the old Whig party of Henry Clay (Lincoln’s “beau ideal of a statesman”) and then to the Republicans. Once Phillips had Lincoln firmly in his sights after the Chicago nominating convention, his estimate of Lincoln only dropped. “Who is this huckster in politics?” Phillips exclaimed. “Who is this county court advocate?”

Here is Mr. Lincoln. . . . He says in regard to such a point, for instance, as the abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia, that he has never studied the subject; that he has no distinctive ideas about it. . . . But so far as he has considered it, he should be, perhaps, in favor of gradual abolition, when the slave-holders of the district asked for it! Of course he would. I doubt if there is a man throughout the whole South who would not go as far as that. . . . That is the amount of his anti-slavery, if you choose to call it such, which according to the Chicago thermometer, the Northern states are capable of bearing. The ice is so thin that Mr. Lincoln, standing six feet and four inches, cannot afford to carry any principles with him onto it!

It has been tempting to write off much of this to the not inconsiderable egos of many of the abolitionist leaders, or to the impatience that three decades of agitation had bred into the abolitionist faithful, or to the presumably forgivable political naiveté of the abolitionists, who simply did not realize that Lincoln was on their side but had political realities to deal with that they did not understand. For most interpreters, Lincoln and the abolitionists were simply a convergence waiting to happen; this has become, for the most part, the familiar cadence of the story.

Lincoln himself deliberately fed such perceptions from time to time. “Well, Mr. Sumner,” Lincoln remarked to the florid Massachusetts radical in November 1861, “the only difference between you and me on this subject is a difference of a month or six weeks in time.” He told the Illinois businessman and politician Wait Talcott that the opinions of “strong abolitionists . . . have produced

a much stronger impression on my mind than you may think.” And John Roll, a Springfield builder and longtime acquaintance of Lincoln’s, heard him reply to a question as to whether he was an abolitionist, “I am mighty near one.”

**B**ut being “near one” was precisely the point. If to be opposed to slavery was to be “near” abolitionism, then almost the entire population of the northern free states was “near” abolitionism too. But opposition to slavery never necessitated abolition. Antislavery might just as easily take the form of containment (opposing the legalization of slavery in any new states), colonization (forced repatriation of blacks to Africa), gradual emancipation (freedom keyed to decades-long timetables), or in the minds of most Northerners, nothing at all, so long as slavery got no nearer than it was. “I am a whig,” Lincoln wrote to his longtime friend Joshua Speed in 1855, “but others say there are no whigs, and that I am an abolitionist.” But this Lincoln denied: “I now do no more than oppose the *extension* of slavery.” Even when he would finally contemplate emancipation, it was not on the abolitionists’ terms. His ideal emancipation legislation would “have the three main features—gradual—compensation—and the vote of the people,” all of which abolitionists abhorred.

Lincoln’s analysis of the abolition radicals as “fiends” had long roots in his own personal history. His parents were Separate Baptists, a small denomination that taught God’s absolute control over each and every human choice, down to the smallest events, so that no one really exercised free will in choosing. The Separates were antislavery; but they were deeply hostile to reform movements as well, since such movements (like abolitionism) smacked too strongly of human efforts at self-improvement by strength of human will, apart from God. The Separates supported “no mission Boards for converting the heathen, or for evangelizing the world; no Sunday Schools as nurseries to the church; no schools of any kind for teaching theology and divinity, or for preparing young men for the ministry,” and especially no “Secret Societies, Christmas Trees, Cake-Walks, and various other things.” If the world required reforming, God would undertake it; humanly constructed reform movements were not needed.

Lincoln rebelled against his parents’ religion early in adolescence. When he moved to Springfield, Illinois, in 1837 to begin practicing law, “he was skeptical as to the great truths of the Christian Religion.” But he remained just as doubtful as the Separates about how free the human will really was. Even if he could no longer believe in the Separates’ God, he still believed that “the human mind is impelled to action, or held in rest by some power, over which the mind itself has no control.” And he continued all through his life to retain a vivid sense of “a Superintending & overruling Providence that guides and controls the operation of the world.” This “Providence” might be a personality of sorts, for all that Lincoln knew. But he spoke of “Providence” more often in faceless terms, as though “Providence” was “more akin to natural law.” In that way, Lincoln understood that the universe was run not by a God who could be influenced by prayer to change the course of human events, but by “Law & Order, & not their violation or suspension.”

Even when he was inclined to speak of God as a divine person, as he did in many of his presidential utterances, it was invariably a God who was a “Judge,” weighing out the balances of justice according to law.

By midlife, Lincoln had tempered some of his early religious skepticism, partly because of the political tax it laid on him among Illinois voters and partly because of a maturing of his own religious questions. But he still never joined a church, and the churches he did more or less attend, mostly for the sake of his family and for political appearances, were Presbyterian, where the theology, like that of the Separate Baptists, pinned its focus on God’s absolute control of all human affairs, shorn of any interest in reform movements—especially abolition. Asked by Judge William Denning whether he “belonged to any secret society . . . his answer was I do not belong to any society except it be for the good of my country.”

That one exception was filled in Lincoln’s life by his political allegiance to the Whig Party. Like the Whigs, Lincoln was a liberal nationalist; he looked for his political identity not in regional or ethnic sources but in an expansive sense of American nationality. In his 1852 eulogy for the Whigs’ founder, Henry Clay, Lincoln extolled Clay as “that truly national man” whose devotion to liberty and equality led him to walk a middle path of compromise to save the Union. “Whatever he did, he did for the whole country,” rather than for any particular section or interest. Clay “loved his country, but mostly because it was a free country . . . because he saw in such, the advancement, prosperity, and glory, of human liberty, human right, and human nature.”

**I**f there was such a thing as an American identity for Lincoln, it was founded on appeals to a universal human nature and universal human rights, and discovered not in the passionate romanticist ideals of race or gender but by reason. Lincoln’s most famous utterance, the Gettysburg Address, began with the assertion that the American republic was founded on a universal “proposition, that all men are created equal.” For Lincoln, the “happy day” in human history would come “when, all appetites controlled, all passions subdued, all matters subjected, *mind*, all-conquering *mind*, shall live and move the monarch of the world. Glorious consummation! Hail fall of Fury! Reign of Reason, all hail!”

The place Lincoln gave to the centrality of propositions was underscored by the reverence with which he approached the Constitution. As early as 1848, as a congressman advocating Clay’s programs of tax-supported “internal improvements,” Lincoln attacked proposals to amend the Constitution as a mistake leading to ruin. “Better, rather, habituate ourselves to think of it as unalterable,” Lincoln said. “The men who made it have done their work, and have passed away. Who shall improve on what *they* did?”

On this point more than any other, Lincoln expressly condemned the abolitionists. One of his earliest comments on the movement, in the Henry Clay eulogy, criticized abolitionists as the enemies of constitutional government. “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,” Lincoln said, “together

with all their more halting sympathizers, have received and are receiving their just execration.” Once he abandoned the sinking ship of the Whig Party in 1856 for the Republicans, he warned, “If . . . there be any man in the republican party who is impatient of . . . the constitutional obligations bound around it, he is misplaced, and ought to find a place somewhere else.” Much as he appealed to Stephen Douglas’s followers in 1856 to “Throw off these things, and come to the rescue of this great principle of equality,” he also added, “Don’t interfere with anything in the Constitution. That must be maintained, for it is the only safeguard of our liberties.”

It was not that Lincoln’s cautious constitutionalism made him indifferent to slavery. He was not exaggerating when he said, “I have always hated slavery,” during his great debates with Douglas in 1858. But what he meant by slavery before the 1850s was any relationship of economic restraint or any systematic effort to box ambitious and enterprising people like himself into a “fixed condition of

labor, for his whole life.” This slavery was what he experienced as a young man under his father, and he came to associate it with agrarianism. “I used to be a slave,” Lincoln said in an early speech; in fact, “we were all slaves one time or another . . . and

now I am so free that they let me practice law.” Slavery, in this sense, included anyone, even a “freeman,” who is “fatally fixed for life, in the condition of a hired laborer.”

Beyond that, until the 1840s it is difficult to see that Lincoln had any corresponding concern about slavery as a system of personal injustice when only blacks were the slaves. When the Illinois legislature resolved in January 1837 that “property in slaves is sacred to the slave-holding states by the Federal Constitution,” Lincoln and Whig judge Daniel Stone protested that “the institution of slavery is founded on both injustice and bad policy.” But Lincoln’s protest bent obligingly in the other direction far enough to add that “the promulgation of abolition doctrines tends rather to increase than to abate its evils.” It was one of the things Lincoln pointed out for praise in Henry Clay, that although Clay “was, on principle and in feeling, opposed to slavery,” he was no abolitionist, and had no workable plan “how it could at *once* be eradicated, without producing a greater evil, even to the cause of liberty itself.” Lincoln insisted that “I can express all my views on the slavery question by quotations from Henry Clay. Doesn’t this look like we are akin?”

Lincoln was not galvanized into open opposition to black slavery until 1854 and the Kansas-Nebraska Act, when it became evident that black slavery was not going to accept confinement to the southern states but intended to

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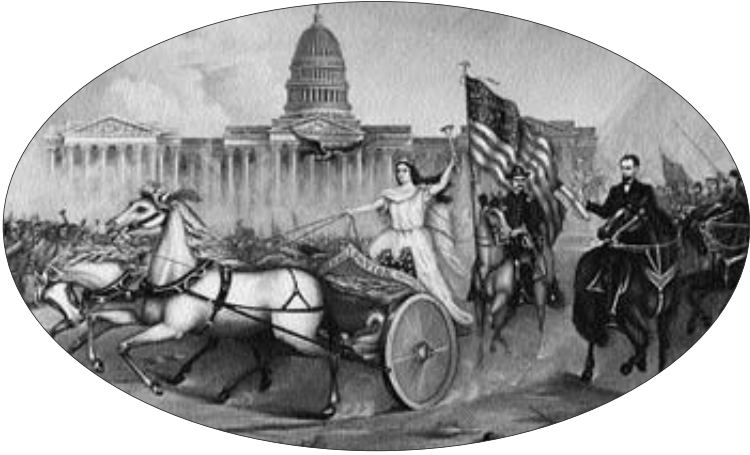


extend itself across the western territories, and perhaps even into the free states, where slave labor could then compete with free wage labor. Even so, the only solution he could imagine was to “send them to Liberia—to their own native land.” As late as 1863, as president, Lincoln was still experimenting with colonization schemes; by the testimony (admittedly unreliable) of Massachusetts politician-turned-general Benjamin F. Butler, he was still toying with them within weeks of his death.

Lincoln’s fundamental approach to slavery as a political-economic problem, as much as a moral one, stands in dramatic contrast to the most basic instincts, and not merely the specific goals, of American abolitionism. Dangerous as it is to generalize about a movement as fissiparous as American abolitionism proved to be over 30 years, it had, nevertheless, certain common reflexes, and almost all of them ran counter to Lincoln’s. The most fundamental difference was the centrality of religion and religious language to the abolitionist movement. Although many abolitionists (such as Garrison) turned their backs on organized Protestantism, it provided abolitionism with its imagery, its tactics, and its uncompromising urgency. The day that Garrison burned a copy of the Constitution at the annual Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society picnic was the day the southern-born abolitionist Moncure Conway “distinctly recognized that the antislavery cause was a religion” and “that Garrison was a successor of the inspired axe-bearers—John the Baptist, Luther, Wesley, George Fox.”

But this was a position for religion in public life that Lincoln, who was almost pathologically shy about bringing his religious ideas into public view, deplored. Although, as an erstwhile Whig and a Republican, Lincoln as president was more receptive to public affirmations of religious postures than his Democratic predecessors, he adamantly refused to allow religious denominations or denominational leaders to dictate policy. The religious sentiments that pervade his Second Inaugural Address are more substantial than any American president’s before or since, but they are also remarkable for their message of restraint: No one has sufficient insight to understand God’s intentions, and the only appropriate response is charity for all and malice toward none.

Lincoln experienced even greater distance from the abolitionists once some of the specifics of abolitionist religion came more clearly into view. A swelling confidence in the human will to achieve salvation by its own efforts had marked much of evangelical Protestant thinking in the 19th century, as Methodists, Baptists, and even many Presbyterians turned to the aggressive promotion of revivals, awakenings, and mass conversions to expand Protestantism’s cultural and spiritual influence in American life. Revivalism, in the hands of celebrated preachers such as Charles Finney, was built on the assumption that conversion to God was a spiritual act one could perform for oneself, instead of waiting patiently for God to do it as *his* choice. That, in turn, allowed preachers to demand immediate and unconditional compliance with their moral directives. After all, since conversion was a matter of rational choice, there was no reason for delaying that choice. For the revivalists, this kind of immediatism translat-



Emancipation Proclamation (1864), by A. A. Lamb

ed into demands for “the great fundamental principle of *immediate abolition*” in the hands of abolitionists such as Garrison, Henry Ward Beecher, Elizur Wright, and Theodore Dwight Weld. But immediatism was exactly the attitude that had alienated Lincoln from his ancestral Protestantism. “Probably it is to be my lot to go on in a twilight, feeling and reasoning my way through life, as questioning, doubting Thomas did,” Lincoln once remarked, not expecting immediate conversion either to Christianity or to abolition.

**I**mmediatism was not the only religious attitude among the abolitionists that alienated Lincoln. The great obstruction on the road to repentance, according to both the revivalists and the abolitionists, was selfishness. To a certain extent, Lincoln agreed: “His idea was that all human actions were caused by motives,” recalled his law partner, William Herndon, “and that at the bottom of these motives was self.” The difference was that Lincoln’s notion of selfishness in human nature was the great, unmovable characteristic of human life. “He defied me to act without motive and unselfishly,” Herndon remembered, “and when I did the act and told him of it . . . I could not avoid the admission that he had demonstrated the absolute selfishness of the entire act.” For Lincoln, selfishness described the full extent of human motivation and action. In the lexicon of revivalism, however, the power of free human choosing allowed people to transcend selfishness. And the abolitionists, likewise, expected slaveholders similarly to transcend the selfishness of slaveholding by a tremendous act of an awakened will. “We have no selfish motive to appeal to,” Wendell Phillips asserted in 1852. “We appeal to white men, who cannot see any present interest they have in the slave question,” asking them to “ascend to a level of disinterestedness which the masses seldom reach, before we can create any excitement in them on the questions of slavery.” Herndon had thought exactly the same way until Lincoln “divested me of that delusion.”

For that reason, Lincoln did not share Phillips’s hope that excitement in the masses would do much to wean slaveholders from slavery. Excitement was, if anything, precisely what Lincoln feared to inject into public dis-

course. In 1838, he warned that the chief threat to liberty was “the increasing disposition to substitute the wild and furious passions, in lieu of the sober judgments of the Courts.” Twenty-three years later, on the eve of the secession of the southern states from the Union, he was still warning, “Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection.”

Lincoln did find his way to the abolition of slavery, first emancipating slaves who served the Confederacy’s military interests through the Confiscation Acts of 1861 and 1862, then abolishing slavery in the Confederate states through the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, and finally eradicating slavery forever in the entire United States through the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865. By the same token, some of the abolitionists, especially Garrison, gradually warmed to Lincoln and openly supported his re-election in 1864. “There is no mistake about it in regard to Mr. Lincoln’s desire to do all that he can see it right and possible for him to do to uproot slavery,” Garrison assured his wife after meeting with Lincoln at the White House in the summer of 1864. Much as he had dreaded the importunities of the radicals in his own party, Lincoln finally had to concede that although they were “bitterly hostile” to him personally, and “utterly lawless—the unhandiest devils in the world to deal with . . . after all their faces are set Zionwards.” As he told John B. Henderson, “Sumner and Wade and Chandler are right about [abolition]. . . . We can’t get through this terrible war with slavery existing.”

But cooperation was not affection. Even after emancipation, Lincoln continued to speak of the abolitionists as though Zion were only occasionally their destination. He told Pennsylvania political chieftain William D. Kelley that he loathed “the self-righteousness of the Abolitionists,” and spoke of them to Massachusetts antislavery activist Eli Thayer “in terms of contempt and derision.” Army chaplain John Eaton remembered Lincoln exclaiming of a “well-known abolitionist and orator” (probably Phillips), “I don’t see why God lets him live!”

**L**incoln came to emancipation at last, but by a road very different from that taken by the abolitionists. Where they built their argument on the demand of evangelicalism for immediate repentance, Lincoln was reluctant to make revivalistic demands in the public square and instead preferred gradualism and compensation for emancipated slaves. Where the abolitionists preached from passion and choice, Lincoln worked from reason and patience. Where they called for immediatism without regard for the consequences, it was precisely the economic consequences of slavery and its extension that kindled Lincoln’s opposition in the 1850s. And where they brushed aside the Constitution’s implicit sanctions for slavery—and with them the Constitution—Lincoln would proceed against slavery no further than the Constitution allowed. They were racial egalitarians in an age of unthinking racism. Lincoln was only a natural-rights equalitarian in the tradition of John Locke, and there is little in Lincoln’s writing between 1863 and his death that allows us to predict accurately what his policies on the freedmen’s civil rights would have been.

And yet, it was the name of Abraham Lincoln—restrained, emotionally chilly, with an unblinking eye for compromise—that ended up at the bot-

tom of the Emancipation Proclamation. This raises the large-scale question, posed recently by historian Eric McKittrick, that has so often haunted the literature of the abolitionist movement: “What exactly was the function of William Lloyd Garrison, and those who acted similarly, in preparing the way for the ending of slavery, and in relation to the other influences converging toward the same end? Where does the extremist—the fanatic, the single-minded zealot—fit in?”

The most recent neo-abolitionist histories, by Henry Mayer and Paul Goodman, have joined older neo-abolitionist works by historians such as Howard Zinn and Martin Duberman in answering that question with a resounding affirmation of the strategic centrality of the abolitionists to the end of slavery. Mayer, for instance, identifies the abolitionists as the *sine qua non*. “William Lloyd Garrison,” he writes in the second sentence of his recent biography of the abolitionist, “is an authentic American hero who, with a biblical prophet’s power and a propagandist’s skill, forced the nation to confront the most crucial moral issue in its history.” And if the abolitionists are central, so are their culture, their strategy, and their rhetoric. By hallowing zealotry, the neo-abolitionists identify direct (even if nonviolent) action as the only morally legitimate stance in American reform. Only by means of incessant pushing of the most radical kind was the nation made ready for abolition; only by means of the dauntless radicalism of *The Liberator* was justice achieved and the way paved for further reform in American society. By extension, we are encouraged to go and do likewise.

**T**his is a comforting, and yet troubling, view. It forgets how many other strands of thinking besides moral rectitude went into the making of slavery’s end and ignores the potency lent to the antislavery cause by the liberal capitalist argument for free wage labor. Even worse, it sanctions a political philosophy built on romantic Kantianism and hallowed in our times by John Rawls that stands in stark opposition to the Enlightenment politics of prudence so vital to Lincoln’s Lockean sense of politics. The politics of the abolitionists is the politics of the imperative. It is built on the assumption that social solutions are perfectly within the command of the will, that we already know what right is, that the rational calculation of possibilities is an unlawful restraint on the commission of virtuous deeds, that wishing well is an acceptable substitute for paying attention to how on earth good can be done without spawning greater evils. And in practical terms, it allows those who would follow in the abolitionists’ path more than a whiff of self-satisfied wisdom and a willful ignorance of the contention, subdivision, and dissipation of forces that so often squandered abolition’s real strengths and focus.

Lincoln, by contrast, embodied the complexity of American opposition to slavery. He came at the problem only when slavery ceased being content with living under compromises and tried to assert its extension as a solution to the South’s dwindling political influence. The end of slavery owed something to a sense of awakened moral responsibility, but it also owed far more than we have been willing to admit to the long swing of ideas about political economy, and to the public revulsion toward specific public events, such as the efforts of slaveholders to

“gag” debate over slavery in Congress, and the resort to proslavery terrorism in the organizing of the Kansas Territory in the 1850s. Above all, Lincoln was willing to subordinate his own preferences (including his “oft-expressed wish that everyone ought to be free”) to the need to build coalitions rather than purify sects. Lincoln had no illusions about his own sanctity or his enemies’ depravity, and he was constantly in mind of the price being paid in human lives and treasure for even the noblest of results.

“If I had had my way, this war would never have been commenced,” Lincoln told the English Quaker activist Eliza P. Gurney a month after issuing the Emancipation Proclamation. “If I had been allowed my way,” he continued, “this war would have been ended before this,” perhaps before the Proclamation had even been contemplated. That sentiment has earned him the execration of every abolitionist and neo-abolitionist, from Garrison to (most recently) *Ebony* editor Lerone Bennett, whose book *Forced into Glory: Abraham Lincoln’s White Dream* depicts Lincoln as a callous white racist, the kind of fence straddler “we find in almost all situations of oppression.” For all of his rant, Lincoln biographers will ignore Bennett at their peril, because both Garrison and Bennett had a point: Lincoln’s best plan for emancipation (without the helping hand of the war) was a gradualized scheme that would have allowed the grandparents of some of today’s adult African Americans to have been born in slavery.

**T**he question Lincoln might have asked the neo-abolitionists was whether the costs of their way of immediate emancipation—costs that included a civil war, 600,000 dead, a national economic body blow worse than the Great Depression, and the broken glass of reconstruction to walk over—were actually part of the calculation of results. Neither alternative was particularly pretty. (And of the two, I must be candid enough to confess that I cannot see myself in 1861 applauding Lincoln’s alternative). Lincoln never doubted that emancipation was *right* and that slavery was *wrong*. But he had an inkling that it was possible to do something right in such a way that it fostered an infinitely greater wrong. “If I take the step” of emancipation purely because “I think the measure politically expedient, and morally right,” Lincoln asked Salmon Chase in 1863, “would I not thus give up all footing upon constitution or law? Would I not thus be in the boundless field of absolutism?”

There is a zeal that is not according to knowledge; many of the abolitionists had it in spades and reveled in it. To be pushed into reform merely by the exigencies of war, politics, and the long movement of economies was, for them, not to have zeal at all. Still, because their relentless campaign was followed in 1865 by abolition, it has been easy to conclude that zeal earned its own justification simply through the end of slavery.

But this may be the greatest *post hoc, ergo propter hoc* fallacy in American history. Between the word of abolition and the deed of emancipation falls the ambiguous shadow of Abraham Lincoln. For more than a century, the genius of American reform has been its confidence that Garrison and Phillips were right. The realities of American reform, however, as the example of Lincoln suggests, have been another matter. □