





An early photograph of Abraham Lincoln.

THE MYTH OF THE  
GREAT EMANCIPATOR  
Abraham Lincoln's Views  
on Slavery and Race

by Greg Loren Durand

Institute for Southern Historical Review  
Toccoa, Georgia

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Abraham Lincoln was not, above all other things, the liberator of the colored race. He never contemplated with any degree of substantiation the prospect of a free negro race living in the same country as a free white race.

— Roy Basler

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.

— Abraham Lincoln



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## CHAPTER ONE

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### “The White Man’s President”

Most Americans today have an almost religious reverence for the memory of Abraham Lincoln, believing him to be the ideological predecessor to the 1960s civil rights icon, Martin Luther King, Jr. According to one writer, Lincoln “was a powerful statesman with a moral vision of where his country must go to preserve and enlarge the rights of all its people,” and like Lincoln, King “was a world historical individual who embodied the essence of his age. . . . What King said and did carried on Lincoln’s work and helped move America a long step closer to the realization of her ancient dream of equality for all.”<sup>1</sup> So ingrained is this belief in the collective consciousness of the nation that it would be viewed as indecorous, if not outright heresy, to suggest that the man seated in the Greek-style temple on the Potomac was anything but the destroyer of slavery and harbinger of Negro equality. The inconvenient truth

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1. Stephen B. Oates, *Builders of the Dream: Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Fort Wayne, Indiana: Lincoln Library and Museum, 1982), page 1.

about Lincoln, however, is that he “was not, above all other things, the liberator of the colored race. He never contemplated with any degree of substantiation the prospect of a free negro race living in the same country as a free white race.”<sup>2</sup> Instead, his views on the Black man were typical of a member of the Border State laboring class: “Descended from the poor whites of a slave State, through many generations, he inherited the contempt, if not the hatred, held by that class for the negro. . . . [H]e could no more feel sympathy for that wretched race than he could for the horse he worked or the hog he killed.”<sup>3</sup> Moreover, Lincoln “was sentimentally opposed to slavery, but he was afraid of freedom. He dreaded its effect on both races. He was opposed to slavery more because it was a public nuisance than because of its injustice to the oppressed black man, whose condition, he did not believe, would be greatly, if at all, benefitted by freedom.”<sup>4</sup>

Even a cursory examination of Lincoln’s speeches and correspondence will substantiate this assessment. Although he had previously made a few passing references to slavery, the bulk of his statements on the subject were made during the period beginning in the fall of 1854 to the end of his life. According to his own recollections, it was the Kansas-Nebraska Act which moved him to speak his

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2. Roy Basler (editor), *Abraham Lincoln: His Speeches and Writings* (Cleveland, Ohio: The World Publishing Company, 1946), page 423.

3. Donn Piatt, *Memories of the Men Who Saved the Union* (New York: Belford, Clarke and Company, 1887), page 31.

4. John F. Hume, *The Abolitionists, Together With Personal Memories of the Struggle For Human Rights* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1905), page 145.

mind publicly on the institution and its extension into the western Territories.<sup>5</sup> In his debate with Stephen Douglas at Peoria, Illinois on October 15, 1854, he said:

When southern people tell us they are no more responsible for the origin of slavery, than we; I acknowledge the fact. When it is said that the institution exists; and that it is very difficult to get rid of it, in any satisfactory way, I can understand and appreciate the saying. I surely will not blame them for not doing what I should not know how to do myself. If all earthly power were given me, I should not know what to do, as to the existing institution. My first impulse would be to free all the slaves, and send them to Liberia, — to their own native land. But a moment’s reflection would convince me, that whatever of high hope, (as I think there is) there may be in this, in the long run, its sudden execution is impossible. If they were all landed there in a day, they would all perish in the next ten days; and there are not surplus shipping and surplus money enough in the world to carry them there in many times ten days. What then? Free them all, and keep them among us as underlings? Is it quite certain that this betters their condition? I think I would not hold one in slavery, at any rate; yet the point is not clear enough for me to denounce people upon. What next? Free them, and make them politically and socially, our equals? My own feelings will not admit of this; and if mine would, we well know that those of the great mass of white people will not. Whether this feeling accords with justice and sound judgment, is not

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5. Speech at Chicago, Illinois on July 10, 1858; Roy Basler (editor), *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1953), Volume II, page 492.

the sole question, if indeed, it is any part of it. A universal feeling, whether well or ill founded, can not be safely disregarded. We can not, then, make them equals. . . .

Let it not be said I am contending for the establishment of political and social equality between the whites and blacks. I have already said the contrary.<sup>6</sup>

During his 1858 campaign against Douglas for a seat in the United States Senate, Lincoln was accused of being duplicitous on the subject of race, appearing to favor Negro equality in the northern parts of the State in order to appeal to the larger number of Abolitionists there, while expressing more moderate views in the southern counties where "Black Republicanism" was generally reprobated.<sup>7</sup> Lincoln, it was said, "has a fertile genius in devising language to conceal his thoughts," and "he can trim his principals any way in any section, so as to secure votes."<sup>8</sup> It may have been true that Lincoln chose his words carefully, depending on the perceived disposition of his audience, but his basic position remained the same wherever he spoke. At Springfield on July 17, he said, "My declarations upon this subject of negro slavery may be misrepresented, but cannot be misunderstood. I have said that I do not understand the Declaration [of Independence] to mean that all men were

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6. Basler, *Collected Works of Lincoln*, Volume II, pages 255-256, 267.

7. Stephen Douglas appears to have been the originator of the term "Black Republican" during a speech delivered on October 3, 1854 at the Illinois State Agricultural Fair (reported by the *Missouri Republican*, October 6, 1854).

8. Marion Mills Miller and Francis Bicknell Carpenter (editors), *The Works of Abraham Lincoln: Speeches and Debates, 1858-1859* (New York: C.S. Hammond and Company, 1907), pages 79, 108.

created equal in all respects. . . . Certainly the negro is not our equal in color – perhaps not in many other respects. . . .”<sup>9</sup> During his debate with Douglas at Ottawa on August 21, he said:

. . . [T]his is the true complexion of all I have ever said in regard to the institution of slavery and the black race. This is the whole of it, and anything that argues me into his idea of perfect social and political equality with the negro, is but a specious and fantastic arrangement of words, by which a man can prove a horse chestnut to be a chestnut horse. I will say here, while upon this subject, that 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, and I have no inclination to do so. I have no purpose to introduce political and social equality between the white and the black races. There is a physical difference between the two, which in my judgment will probably forever forbid their living together upon the footing of perfect equality, and inasmuch as it becomes a necessity that there must be a difference, I, as well as Judge Douglas, am in favor of the race to which I belong, having the superior position. I have never said anything to the contrary.<sup>10</sup>

On September 18, he elaborated on this statement at Charleston, in the eastern part of the State:

While I was at the hotel to-day an elderly gentleman

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9. Basler, *Collected Works of Lincoln*, Volume II, page 520.

10. Basler, *ibid.*, Volume III, page 16.

called upon me to know whether I was really in favor of producing a perfect equality between the negroes and white people. While I had not proposed to myself on this occasion to say much on that subject, yet as the question was asked me I thought I would occupy perhaps five minutes in saying something in regard to it. 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. And inasmuch as they cannot so live, while they do remain together there must be the position of the superior and the inferior, and I as much as any other man am in favor of having the superior position assigned to the white race.<sup>11</sup>

When Douglas accused him of refusing to address the issue of Negro citizenship, Lincoln said, “I tell [Judge Douglas] very frankly that I am not in favor of negro citizenship. . . . Now my opinion is that the different States have the power to make a negro a citizen under the Constitution of the United States if they choose. . . . If the State of Illinois had that power I should be opposed to the exercise of it. That is all I have to say about it.”<sup>12</sup> This was nothing new, for he had previously stated his conviction that “this

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11. Basler, *ibid.*, pages 145-146.

12. Basler, *ibid.*, page 179.

government was made for the white people and not for the negroes,”<sup>13</sup> and he had never objected to any of the legislation in his State which barred Blacks from voting or holding office.

Lincoln’s private views were no different than those he expressed in public. In an October 18, 1858 letter to fellow Illinois politician, James N. Brown, he wrote, “I do not perceive how I can express myself more plainly than I have done in the foregoing extracts. In four of them I have expressly disclaimed all intention to bring about social and political equality between the white and black races, and, in all the rest, I have done the same thing by clear implication.”<sup>14</sup> In some fragments of speech notes written in September of 1859 are found these words: “Negro equality. Fudge!! How long in the Government of a God great enough to make and maintain this universe, shall there continue to be knaves to vend and fools to gulp, so low a piece of demagoguism as this?”<sup>15</sup>

It is important to remember that political posturing is not just a modern phenomenon; efforts to “smear” the opposing party or candidate with exaggerations and even outright falsehoods, resulting in rebuttals and counterattacks from the intended target, were as common in the Nineteenth Century as they are now. Each party strove to portray themselves in the best possible light, and their opponent in the worst, all designed to play upon the perceived fears or desires of the general public. One of the

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13. Basler, *ibid.*, Volume II, page 281.

14. Basler, *ibid.*, Volume III, page 399.

15. Basler, *ibid.*, page 328.