

Slavery



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Lincoln as 'Great Emancipator' Attacked by Negro Publication

"MYTHS AFTER LINCOLN," so Lloyd Lewis called his book about the reputation of the Great Emancipator. We have been comforted by the myths for more than a full century. But this year's Lincoln's Birthday represents some sort of turn in historical evaluations.

In the February issue of Ebony Magazine, Lerone Bennett Jr., after combing over the Lincoln biographies, has decided that our Civil War President was, in actuality, a "white supremacist" who had to be badgered against his will into signing the Emancipation Proclamation as a matter of military necessity. Since Ebony Magazine is a prominent Negro publication, the decision of influential Negroes that they had better discard Lincoln as an emotional crutch is a point worth recording.

On quite another historical front, the opponents of "Lyndon Johnson's war" in Vietnam have discovered that Lincoln was the Eugene McCarthy or Bobby Kennedy of Mexican War times. And, in point of fact, Lincoln, as a one-term Congressman, did challenge President Polk to name the exact "spot" where the Mexican War started. He wanted

to pin Polk down because he suspected that the first shots in the war had been fired, not on U.S. soil, but on territory that belonged without question to Mexico. This sounds rather like Sen. Fulbright expressing dubiety, not to say disbelief, about what happened in the Gulf of Tonkin to those U.S. destroyers in August of 1964.

Lincoln was called "a second Benedict Arnold" in the Illinois State Register for doubting Polk's motives in starting the Mexican War.

SO, A FULL century and more after his assassination, Lincoln is being disowned by at least some of our more important Negro opinion-makers, and, at the same time, welcomed by the New Left as its spiritual antecedent in opposing a war in which our armies, willy-nilly, were already engaged.

In Lincoln's defense, it should be said that it is given to few men—and to practically no successful political figures—to transcend their times. Lincoln, specialists have never supposed that the Civil War was fought exclusively over the issue of freedom for the slaves. With Lincoln, it began as a war to hold the Union together.

Ebony Magazine is quite correct when it says that Lincoln was not opposed to slavery where it already existed; he was opposed only to its extension into the still uninhabited territories of the West. In short, Lincoln, whatever his feelings about the sufferings of the slaves, was bent on upholding the law of his times as it existed.

The evil of slavery was supported by the Constitution—and Lincoln's proposition was, first, to hold the Union together under the Constitution, and, second, to work out some solution that would compensate slave owners for freeing their slaves over a rather long period.

When the Emancipation Proclamation finally came, it was limited to those parts of the South that had not yet been taken by the advancing Union armies. It was a policy, says Ebony Magazine, that was "conditionally ..determined." At about the same time Lincoln was involved in an abortive attempt to settle black people in the Caribbean or in a

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Slavery

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sparsely inhabited portion of Texas.

DOES ANY of this detract from Lincoln's historical importance? The editors of *Ebony* might ask themselves whether an Abolitionist like William Lloyd Garrison could have been elected President of the United States in 1860. If they had put this question to themselves, which could hardly be answered affirmatively, they might have concluded that Lincoln was not such a bad historical choice after all. History is always a ragged process, and the actors in its dramas are seldom what the myth makers would like them to be.

As for those who try to claim Lincoln as the blood-brother of Henry David Thoreau in unwavering opposition to the Mexican War, the historical record doesn't quite back them up.

It is perfectly true that Lincoln challenged Polk on the question of the war's legitimacy. But he voted for all supplies for the soldiers, and for every request to help them in the field.

He was not an obstructionist, and when Stephen Douglas accused him in one of the Lincoln-Douglas debates of letting down our soldiers in the war, he was incensed to the point of dragging someone up to the platform to testify that he had voted precisely as Douglas himself had voted on every specific supply issue.

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