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Charlie Crepps

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## LINCOLN: THE GRADUAL EMANCIPATION PROJECT, A STORY OF GROWTH

Charlie Crepps

### Introduction

Freedom and confrontation are rarely mutually exclusive throughout the political history of any society. There is an excessive amount of rhetoric documented about the various freedoms achieved in history, and many times, historians reference the confrontation caused by said freedoms. In the context of this paper, confrontation refers to the difficulty of adjusting to the changes made within society after a seismic political shift. Abraham Lincoln was a man that would eventually become the face of a nation's societal progress, but he was placed in the trajectory of the most significant political confrontation experienced in The United States' brief history thus far. Lincoln's approach to this confrontation deserves investigation because of his mythical status in American history and because the issues of slavery needed a resolution, and many groups and individuals had opinions of how to achieve that societal freedom. Some even believed that a solution was unnecessary because of their financial connection to slavery or their moral view. But this essay is not about the chronological development of abolition in America; this essay is about growth. Growth can be represented in many areas during this period, however, this essay focuses on growth in three principal areas: Abraham Lincoln's opinion on the apparent confrontation with the end of slavery, a nation's philosophical development, and the employment of a political strategy that I consider one of the most significant political maneuvers by an American political leader. There tends to be an impression gathered about Lincoln's legacy that it is pure, stainless, and an "unproblematic trajectory toward a predetermined end," as described by Eric Foner.<sup>1</sup> Regardless of the scale of his legacy, Abraham Lincoln's impact was developed throughout his legal, political, and societal

involvements. Many historians point to the inconsistencies of Lincoln's political speeches and decisions as evidence that Lincoln had selfish motivations behind his political platform on slavery. Though Lincoln's narrative on slavery appears to be turbulent, he maintained the fundamental moral opinion that slavery was a natural evil. Based on this understanding, Lincoln felt that the most effective way to eradicate slavery and prevent its further expansion was to sway public sentiment toward his moral stance. This approach to the problem of slavery shaped opinion regarding personal freedoms within the public and on Capitol Hill. Lincoln developed public sentiment throughout the nation by leading legal and political decisions that followed the framework of his philosophical determinations on slavery and personal freedom—which he communicated through speeches and debates. All of these calculated decisions are predicated upon the moral understanding and philosophy apparent in Lincoln's writings and correspondence. The political leader is, and was, a complicated character to understand. Historians can juxtapose their difficulty to determine Lincoln's intent with testaments from close friends to the former president, such as David Davis. Davis recalls Lincoln as "the most reticent, secretive man I ever saw or expected to see."<sup>2</sup> For historians to believe that the retrospective understanding of the Lincoln landscape has been investigated in its entirety is historical immaturity. In this paper, I take a magnifying glass into the morality of Lincoln and assess his most profound meditations on slavery while outlining the impact that his indelible mind had on a flowering nation's perception of personal freedoms. Lincoln experienced influences from political movements and groups, such as the abolition movement, and ultimately concluded that public sentiment was a more potent tool than



"Standing Lincoln" statue of martyred U.S. president Abraham Lincoln inside his tomb at Oak Ridge Cemetery in Springfield, Illinois. Photographer Carol M. Highsmith. Library of Congress.

legislative action. Lincoln grew into this understanding and should not be regarded as a consistent man. He tailored his speeches and writings, beginning in the infancy of his career, toward a more philosophical understanding of personal rights to persuade the American public against the expansion of slavery and its promulgation into national law. But this political maneuver, caused by progressive confrontation, would shape the country's zeitgeist regarding personal freedoms, which is an accomplishment that should not be understated.

### **Historiography**

To write that there is an overwhelming consensus about Abraham Lincoln's legacy by historians would be disingenuous. There are a limited number of nuanced views

on Abraham Lincoln's political role in eradicating slavery within the United States of America, but historians such as James Oakes, Foner, and David S. Reynolds all address Lincoln's legacy in their own personal way. A portion of the rhetoric, especially from professors such as Fred Kaplan of Queens College, details a version of a man with evil intentions, creating various disillusioned opinions of his character, or attempting to synonymize his political views with the actions carried out in his personal life. There is also a public belief that Lincoln was a political saint who could do no wrong. But, as James Oakes writes, "I propose to you, a third Lincoln."<sup>3</sup> The Lincoln that exists in this third space of historical recollection is the same Lincoln by which historians such as Eric Foner, James Oakes, and David S. Reynolds all detail. They tell a story of an imperfect, deeply meditative man who set out on a journey through the American political landscape with a vision of how a budding nation could provide a platform of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness to all its citizens. In analytical professions and areas of study, there is a belief that conclusions must exist within the form of finality, and the academic world of history has the potential to operate under the same assumptions. Eric Foner, along with Oakes and Reynolds, were able to take a step away from finality and view the legacy Lincoln left behind as a story of growth, imperfection, investigation, and deliberation. A way to understand the infallibility of many historians' views on Lincoln's legacy can be achieved by juxtaposing the legacy with the early interpretations of the American Constitution. In the time of Lincoln, there were two dominant perceptions of The Constitution that addressed the issue of slavery; more precisely, the intentions and philosophical motivations of the Founding Fathers when drafting the document. These first perceptions were pro-slavery and believed that the Constitution explicitly defined humans as property. The adverse opinion, which Abraham

Lincoln radicalized during wartime, was that of an antislavery perception.<sup>4</sup> Oakes goes on to detail that neither of these perceptions were born alongside the Constitution itself, but rather, were reactions to one another. He equates historians' views on Lincoln's legacy with the differing perceptions of the Constitution.<sup>5</sup> An arrangement of how historians would view Lincoln's legacy was not made before the statesman's assassination, nor was an arrangement made between historians before the conception of the Constitution. Nuance is a reality of history, and Oakes exemplifies the necessarily nuanced historical thinking when analyzing the life of a polarizing figure such as Lincoln. In his work, *The Fiery Trial*, Eric Foner details many of the same sentiments that Oakes puts forward, but approaches them in a separate way. He recognizes that the academic rhetoric is turbulent at best, and Lincoln's legacy is interpreted in an infinite number of ways.<sup>6</sup> This conclusion is consistent with Oakes' understanding of the issue. Foner has a story that he wants to tell, and that story is about Lincoln's relationship with the issue of slavery. He feels that if he were to engage in the same approach as Oakes, it would "result in a much longer, and extremely tedious, narrative."<sup>7</sup> So, Foner explains that Lincoln had his shortcomings, but he also fundamentally, economically, and morally repudiated the institution of slavery. Oakes' and Foner's conclusions intertwine in an exciting way in which they draw the same suppositions about the influences that led to Lincoln's philosophical view on slavery. Foner mentions abolitionists as integral influencers to the political field that Lincoln was forced to operate within,<sup>8</sup> and Oakes writes that antislavery constitutionalism fundamentally aligned with how abolitionists and Lincoln interpreted the Constitution, thus influencing their approaches to politics.<sup>9</sup> There are differences in how these historians approach Lincoln and how they interpret his legacy. Still, their interpretations have more similarities than differences, which is perfectly analogous to

how Oakes describes the relationship between Lincoln and antislavery radicals (abolitionists).<sup>10</sup> The academic narrative surrounding Lincoln has progressed from analyzing his character and political decisions to a nuanced view on the external forces that influenced his political thinking. Historian David S. Reynolds draws attention to this rhetorical shift in the preface of his biography on Lincoln titled *Abe*. Reynolds explicitly details this by writing,

This book explores the ways in which his absorption and transformation of roiling cultural currents made him into the Leader Leo Tolstoy hailed as 'the only real giant' among 'all the great national heroes and statesmen of history,' and whom Karl Marx called 'one of the rare men who succeed in becoming great, without ceasing to be good.'<sup>11</sup>

Despite their varying motivations and perspectives, Oakes, Foner, and Reynolds understand that Lincoln's antislavery stance was influenced by cultural movements such as antislavery constitutionalism and the abolitionist movement. This essay follows in the footsteps of these forward-thinking historians and takes a broad, nuanced view of Lincoln's political action. Additionally, given the understanding that external movements influenced Lincoln's perspective on slavery, this essay takes a direct investigation into how Lincoln interpreted these movements, understood their cultural impact, and implemented his antislavery initiatives through swaying public sentiment.

### **The Philosophy**

Slavery was an absolute moral evil to Lincoln, and he would stop at nothing to eliminate the perpetuation of this evil. Lincoln's philosophy on slavery evolved and gained influence from groups such as the "radical" abolitionist movement, but he maintained a consistent view on human rights throughout his career. There are intricacies within Lincoln's philosophy,

and examining those intricacies lay a foundation for how Lincoln went about implementing his gradual destruction of pro-slavery sentiment. An analysis of Lincoln's philosophy on natural rights, citizenship, and individual state rights is necessary to establish the trajectory of his political decisions and required to qualify his ideas on slavery. The theme of Lincoln's preponderance of existential thinking is not lost in this explanation, and he thought deeply about the Declaration of Independence and the application of its assertions. Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness were values that were unlimited to any race under Lincoln's interpretation of this revolutionary doctrine. He regarded slavery as an act of evil, an evil that thwarted life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness for an entire race of people. James Oakes details three philosophical, legal, and applicable distinctions that outline Lincoln's thinking on slavery. The three distinctions are natural rights, citizenship rights, and finally, states' rights. These distinctions cooperate while also existing in a bottom-up hierarchical system. Lincoln began his thinking on slavery from the foundation of these distinctions, and he distinguished this foundation as natural rights. In 1854, he delivered a speech in Peoria, Illinois, where he addressed the Kansas-Nebraska Act to clarify his position on the expansion of slavery. Lincoln's position on natural rights is best represented by a passage within his speech where he states, "the doctrine of self-government is right--absolutely and eternally right..."<sup>12</sup> This is further evidence for Lincoln's belief that natural rights are a fundamental building block to the Declaration of Independence's freedoms afforded to United States citizens. He continues by saying, "But if the negro is a man, is it not to that extent, a total destruction of self-government, to say that he too shall govern himself?"<sup>13</sup> Abraham Lincoln uses this argument to say that a man is afforded the right to govern himself regardless of race. He later explains that despotism, in this context, is that of a man

that believes he is afforded the right to control himself, but does not afford another man that possibility. He concludes this thought by saying, "If the negro is a man, why then 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."<sup>14</sup> Lincoln certainly feels that slavery is a usurpation of the right of a man to self-govern and that race should not inhibit a man's pursuit of self-governing. Oakes explains that Lincoln created a distinction for his thoughts on this issue by adding an egalitarian element to his interpretation of the Declaration of Independence. His democratic counterparts did not concur.<sup>15</sup> Oakes's second distinction is the privileges and immunities that Lincoln believes citizenship affords a citizen. Before a man is a citizen of a state, he is a citizen of the nation, and the government distinguishes the privileges he can exercise. The Constitution says nothing on the issue of race, nor does it establish a variance because of ancestral heritage. Lincoln represented this viewpoint by strongly opposing the Dred Scot Decision while supporting the Fugitive Slave Clause, which granted any free black person their citizenship to the nation. Still, the sentiment remains, Lincoln did not believe that it was enshrined in the ethos of American doctrine that citizenship or self-governing capabilities should be withheld from any man. The only viable opinion for Lincoln to posture on slavery while possessing these values and principles is to oppose any inquisition of a citizen's right to what the Constitution affords them. Unfortunately, the following distinction is where some historians find inconsistencies within Lincoln's narrative on slavery, and they cite his neglect to uphold his narrative under scrutiny in varying political environments. He believed that he could not impede the laws set forth by individual states under the Constitution. The ponderous questions associated with race relations were asked in every state, and each state's conclusions differed, which made Lincoln's strategy



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Lincoln navigated politics in a narrative-driven way, and he implemented his philosophy within his speeches, writings, and letters throughout his entire career. He burdened himself with the responsibility of implementing his ideas and establishing an anti-slavery spirit in the people of the nation. Examining his work within the framing of Oakes' distinctions provides a road map to connect his rhetoric with his legal action. Establishing a fundamental understanding of Lincoln's opinion on natural rights can be achieved by reading an address given to the Young Men's Lyceum of Springfield, Illinois. He specifically targeted the issue of slavery within this speech but began with celebrating the actions of the revolutionary patriots that fought for freedom in America. He says,

Theirs was the task (and nobly they performed it) to possess themselves, and through themselves, us, of this godly land; and to uprear upon its hills and its valleys, a political edifice of liberty and equal rights; 'tis ours only, to transmit these, the former, unprofaned by the foot of an invader; the latter, undecayed by the lapse of time, and untorn by usurpation.<sup>16</sup>

He does not take lightly the sacrifice that patriots made for the sake of perpetuating freedoms within America. He speaks specifically of equal rights under the law. He tells the crowd that it is the responsibility of successive Americans to carry the ideals from the revolution into the country's development. Since much of Lincoln's philosophy rested under the shadow of *American revolutionary* doctrine, Lincoln believed that perpetuating the ideals, values, and principles set forth by the individuals that founded the nation was a valid argument that could persuade the public that slavery did not align with those principles. The more impactful aspect of his rhetoric is the context in which it was given. Lincoln was a young twenty-

on the issue difficult. He was unable to avoid this politically complex issue. Suppose he provides an answer that supports the Constitution where each state is well within its legal rights to legislate on slavery within its borders. In that case, he is labeled a racist for supporting states where slavery is prevalent. Suppose he determines that his position is to usurp state rights and force his philosophy of natural rights on the states. In that case, he is violating the Constitution, contradicting the frame that the Declaration of Independence is lawfully applicable through, and denying his initial concept of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. So, in this challenging position, Lincoln must play the game of politics and defer to state rights. All of the intricacies and nuances of Lincoln's philosophy developed as time progressed, but the fundamental moral pillars of his thinking remained. He was determined to profess these political and philosophical ideas to a fractured nation, hoping that good men and women would believe in him.

eight-year-old entering the muddy waters of politics in 1838, and the above quote represents the early implementation of his philosophy. Whether this implementation of his philosophy was conscious or subconscious, it still carries an insurmountable weight as a testament to Lincoln's view of natural rights—rights which he believed to be vested to all Americans in the Declaration of Independence. In 1857, he wrote on the Dred Scott Supreme Court case and pondered the ramifications that a decision of this magnitude could manufacture. His focus was on the scope of the government and the consequences of an overreaching court, but toward the end of this short letter, he addresses citizenship rights indirectly. He writes, "It is this; that so soon as the Supreme court decides that Dred Scott is a slave, the whole community must decide that not only Dred Scott, but that all persons in like condition, are rightfully slaves."<sup>17</sup> He believed that the federal government does not have the authority to determine the citizenship designation of "slaves" over the scope of the entire country. This relates to his interpretation of the Constitution's detailing on citizenship by race, or lack thereof. In a speech on the decision, Lincoln outlines his positioning of the case as a representation of his opinion. Lincoln used the Declaration of Independence as a defense for his disposition on the matter and used it to refute the opposing side put forward by Judge Stephen Douglas. Lincoln states, "I think the authors of that notable instrument intended to include all men, but they did not intend to declare all men equal in all respects." He further explains that the authors of the Declaration of Independence designated certain unalienable rights to all citizens regardless of color, size, intellect, moral developments, or social capacity.<sup>18</sup> Lincoln also states that the intention for the phrase "all men are created equal" was not for the initial separation from Great Britain, but was meant for future use. The founders needed a process that eliminated the possibility of the government designating

particular groups of people as unequal to the rest of the population. Lincoln's rhetoric in this speech yields historians and readers alike a window into the ethos of his philosophy. Finally, Lincoln addressed state rights in an analogous way by which he approached the citizenship issue and even used much of the same rhetorical analysis that he used in the Dred Scott speech. Lincoln's opinion on the problem can be justly amalgamated by investigating his address delivered on October 16th, 1854, in Peoria, Illinois. He thoroughly denounced the idea that the expansion of slavery should be considered justified by law. The complexity and depth of Lincoln's words should be examined meticulously, beginning with a statement so poignant and profound that it represents the entire thesis of this paper. Lincoln says,

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.<sup>19</sup>

Much of this quote initially aligns with the views of the American Colonization Society, which is based on the freedom then displacement of enslaved people to their native lands. His restraint in this specific section is reticent, and officially announcing the transformation of one's ideas requires a level of confidence that is sparse within politics, especially in the modern era. Still, further within the quote, Lincoln provides an insight into his inner dialogue and decides that he has hope for a society where formerly enslaved people and white men can live in harmony with one another. He explains that immediate emancipation and integration would also be a viable option as the integration would not publicly be accepted and even admits that he is



Memorial to U.S. President Abraham Lincoln at the Lincoln Birthplace site in Hodgenville, Kentucky. Photographer Carol M. Highsmith. Library of Congress.

unsure of his feelings on the issue. He then concludes with a "gradual emancipation" plan to address the problem in the best conceivable way.<sup>20</sup> Lincoln's application of gradual emancipation within the context of this speech can be interpreted as his reluctance to provide an immediate answer to the issue or can be interpreted as another example of his restraint. He defends state rights and uses the Constitution as an authoritative framework for his executive inability to interfere with the state legislature, which is integral to Lincoln's reluctance to make an immediate legal decision and the social zeitgeist not fully accepting integration of the black race.<sup>21</sup> He knew that swaying public sentiment would be a mountain that required immense determination and patience, so Lincoln used the Constitution, the Declaration, and his values as motivation to continue his ominous effort.

Lincoln implemented his philosophy on slavery by espousing antislavery rhetoric. Much of Lincoln's philosophy has been discovered by historians while investigating the essence of the antislavery constitutionalist movement. His words at the address to the Young Men's Lyceum indicate that his opinion on natural rights under the law as a twenty-eight-year-old

aligned with the views of the abolitionists who also ascribed to antislavery constitutionalism. This interpretation was set forth and realized by the radical abolitionist movement, for which Lincoln maintained a cautious perception. In retrospect, many of Lincoln's political ideologies regarding race and slavery toward the end of his career align with the ideals espoused by the "radical" abolitionists. So, historians such as James Oakes tend to conclude that Lincoln progressed the cultural tide which was initiated by the radical abolitionists.<sup>22</sup> This is a small yet impactful part of the construction of Lincoln's philosophical solution to the existential confrontation facing America. The rise of the abolitionist movement began to pressure the legal system in America to find a solution to the moral transgression of slavery, and Lincoln knew that swift legal action would perpetuate conflict and potentially separate the nation for the near future—this was a risk that Lincoln could not take lightly. Due to his comprehension of the impact immediate integration could have, he leaned on his gradual emancipation policy, which would manifest itself as an inclination toward swaying public sentiment against the moral evil of slavery.

### **The Application**

To get a complete picture of Lincoln's legacy, it is necessary to define his understanding, his feelings, and how he ultimately implemented this policy. His debates with Stephen Douglas are the most extended forms of documented introspection that historians use to inquire about Lincoln's true thoughts and feelings on the matter of slavery. The first of these debates took place in Ottawa, Illinois, and it is widely considered Lincoln's worst performance in a public forum. The Democratic-leaning newspaper, the *Illinois State Register*, published an article that stated that Lincoln "stumbled, floundered, and, instead of the speech that he had prepared to make, bored his audience by using up a substantial portion



of his time reading from a speech of 1854, of his own. He did not 'face the music' upon the points made by Douglas." The Chicago Times declared, "He writhed and twisted, but he could not keep up under the infliction, and at last, long before the expiration of his time, he broke down."<sup>23</sup> This is a fair assessment of his performance in this first debate, but it is not the substance that is important; the substance comes from his detailing of public sentiment and the political advantage gained from harnessing it. Lincoln states, "In this and like communities, public sentiment is everything. With public sentiment, nothing can fail; without it nothing can succeed. Consequently, he who molds public sentiment, goes deeper than he who enacts statutes or pronounces decisions. He makes statutes and decisions possible or impossible to be executed."<sup>24</sup> There is no more explicit representation of Lincoln's position on the benefit of equipping public sentiment within his catalog of writings and speeches. Under this view, politicians that succeed at mobilizing public sentiment are the actual generators of law, and without said mobilization, they are merely acting on the surface of political opinion. Most of Lincoln's rhetoric in this speech is directed at Judge Douglas and Douglas's reluctance to grasp a nuanced position on the Dred Scott decision. Lincoln set his sights on proving that Douglas's immense influence could harm the nation and perpetuate the expansion of slavery, even cementing federal law that could prevent any state from outlawing slavery. On this, Lincoln says, "Then what is necessary for the nationalization of slavery? It is simply the next Dred Scott decision. It is merely for the Supreme Court to decide that no State under the Constitution can exclude it, just as they have already decided that under the Constitution neither Congress nor the Territorial Legislature can do it."<sup>25</sup> Lincoln despised the thought of an American political institution such as the Supreme Court, of which Douglas was an integral piece, making such monumental decisions that are not constrained

by checks and balances. He is warning that a man such as Douglas has so much political influence across the nation that if he supports the decision to limit other branches of government from making their own decisions on slavery, this sentiment will reverberate throughout the public.

Lincoln clearly felt that public sentiment was the hand that could lift the veil of racism. David Zarefsky analyzes Lincoln's "public sentiment is everything" proposition in his article titled, "Public Sentiment is Everything": Lincoln's View of Political Persuasion. Zarefsky details six assumptions and implications of Lincoln's assertion that provide an understanding of its application. As a preface, Zarefsky writes,

Lincoln's Ottawa proclamation that 'public sentiment is everything' did double duty for him. It enabled him to magnify the scope of Douglas's errors and to make believable the claim that the incumbent somehow was connected to a plot to nationalize slavery. And it enabled him to resolve what otherwise would have been a problematic tension in his position, between espousing an absolute value and supporting a limited political program.<sup>26</sup>

The first of underlying assumptions derived from the sentiment put forth by Lincoln in Ottawa is that he considered what he would refer to as the public as a singular collective. Zarefsky contends that Lincoln did not think of the public as a collection of individual sentiments, but rather a collective singular entity.<sup>27</sup> This assumption is critical to recognize because it acts as a basis for understanding Lincoln's entire approach to slavery. If he were able to sway public sentiment away from perpetuating the institution of slavery, this would mean the collective public opinion of the nation would stand incongruent, thus voting against slavery's expansion and, ultimately, its destruction. The third of these assumptions

that Zarefsky outlines are Lincoln's intentional wording of public sentiment. Zarefsky writes, "Public sentiment is more enduring than public opinion; it touches deeper roots in an individual's system of beliefs and values. And it is not purely cognitive and rational; it reflects emotional wellsprings, too."<sup>28</sup> Public sentiment has the ability to impact the public's approach to everyday decisions. Within this context, the public may approach their perceptions of race differently if they believe that the institution of slavery is fated for destruction. Lincoln thought that public sentiment had a tangible actuality and presence in society and culture, and this idea harkens back to his belief that sentiment exists as an entity. Lincoln argued that the Dred Scott Decision would have been impossible without the preface of the Kansas-Nebraska Act and the election of 1856.<sup>29</sup> Though these are legal arguments, he is basing these legal arguments on his philosophy of slavery. The sixth assumption that Zarefsky pulls from Lincoln's public sentiment idea is that public sentiment allows citizens of a nation to act independently of the governing agency, and it gives individuals the ability to be active participants in social dialogue.<sup>30</sup> Though Lincoln would eventually see slavery outlawed, he believed he needed to afford citizens the freedom to draw their conclusions. These examples show how Lincoln believed that a long-term solution using public sentiment would liberate the public from top-down governmental control and give citizens of the United States the ability to exist on the same plane of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, regardless of race.

Lincoln's philosophy was never a purely analytical exercise. He was fully committed to taking political action to manifest his ideals. And while researching this topic, a lot of the substance, ideas, theories, and propositions much like the ones outlined and analyzed by Zarefsky, seemed intangible. This can make Abraham Lincoln's gradual emancipation approach seem wistful and inapplicable in a legal sense.

Still, in the winter of 1849, Lincoln took his philosophy to The District of Columbia and proposed an amendment that reflected his philosophy on slavery. An amendment such as this had been theorized upon but rarely even considered a valuable legal action that echoed the public sentiment of the district. After proposing an amendment to abolish slavery in the District of Columbia, Lincoln admitted that he sampled fifteen citizens residing in the District, and zero of the fifteen supported the amendment.<sup>31</sup> Regardless of the result and acceptance of the amendment, this is not the correct conclusion to draw within the context of a gradual approach to slavery legislation. A useful conclusion within this context would be the gesture, the proposal itself, and the wording that Lincoln chooses to use in specific sections of the amendment. Section one of the amendment acts as a proxy thesis to the entire amendment specifying Lincoln's position on slavery in the District of Columbia and beyond the legal bounds of the District. He writes, "Be enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America, in Congress assembled; That no person not now within the District of Columbia, nor now owned by any person or persons now resident within it, nor hereafter born within it, shall be held in slavery within said District."<sup>32</sup> His rhetoric regarding enslaved individuals had rarely been expressed in such a forum, and the only parallel view at the time was that of prominent abolitionists, such as Frederick Douglass. Although the congruency of the two perspectives drifts apart as Lincoln details the subsequent sections, the sentiments are the same. Douglass' legal position supported outright abolition with immediate effect, primarily due to his experience as an enslaved person. In the summer of 1841, Douglass attended a self-proclaimed "grand antislavery" convention spearheaded by the abolitionist writer William Lloyd Garrison. While at the meeting, Douglass admired Garrison's speaking on the issue of slavery and was even



Five dollar bill portrait of Abraham Lincoln. Photographer Anthony Berger. Library of Congress

asked by Garrison to speak, but could barely recollect the statements he made.<sup>33</sup> But what Mr. Douglass did recollect was the villainy of slavery and his immense contempt for slaveholders, which he felt compelled to declare. He even believed that his liberty was in no way designated and that public sentiment at the time would have him rescinded into shackles once again.<sup>34</sup> Though Lincoln and Douglass' methods of emancipation differed, they shared a willingness to condemn the natural evil of slavery, a shared unpopular public sentiment; And though Douglass's writings preceded Lincoln's proposal by eight years, the overwhelming majority of public opinion had not changed.

The year 1849 was just the beginning of this ideological

and cultural revolution from within which Lincoln started to persuade public opinion against slavery and its expansion within the Union. His integrity and dedication to the cause did not slow down on his road to the White House. Ten years later, in 1859, Lincoln delivered a speech in Chicago, Illinois, a battleground of public sentiment that carried a disproportionate amount of weight for Lincoln, compared to other states. Much of the rhetoric he espoused in earlier speeches were passive and theoretical. Still, as time passed, his approach slowly began to turn assertive and he positioned himself on the offensive. Lincoln told the crowd,

Stand together, ready, with match in hand. Allow nothing to turn you to the right or left. Remember how long you have been in setting out on the true course; how long have you been in getting your neighbors to understand and believe as you now do. Stand by your principles; stand by your guns; and victory complete and permanent is sure at last.<sup>35</sup>

In a time when the public dialogue surrounding slavery was becoming nationalized, this call to action was a critical step forward for Lincoln's plan, and it reflected the urgency that Lincoln felt. The urgency heavily weighed on his conscience, so much so that he spoke about the issue of urgency in this very speech. Afraid that individuals would lose faith, he consistently tried to notify the audience that he was aware of the difficulties that patience toward the issue imposed. But he relied on his consistency and countered the impatience, emphasizing the ethos of his argument against slavery: a moral, political, and social wrong.<sup>36</sup> Leading to the Emancipation Proclamation, Lincoln monitored the public temperature and delivered a speech at Independence Hall in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, addressing his understanding of the public's sentiment on slavery. He invoked the "patriotism, wisdom and devotion to principle" spoken at the hall as a

muse and told of sentiments that shaped the feeling, he was able to draw upon. Lincoln begins this speech with a humble opening that provides an insight into his gratitude for ideas outside of his own.<sup>37</sup> The written form of this speech is important because it outlines how the audience responded to things that Lincoln stated. This is an isolated yet impactful example of the sentiment changing in specific areas. Crowds willing to visually and auditorily declare their position on slavery were becoming a regular occurrence. The crowd cheered after Lincoln proclaimed this about the Declaration of Independence, "It was that which gave promise that in due time the weights should be lifted from the shoulders of all men and that all should have an equal chance. (Cheers.)"<sup>38</sup> The crowd then applauded as Lincoln said,

Now, my friends, can this country be saved upon that basis? If it can, I will consider myself one of the happiest men in the world if I can help save it. If it can't be saved upon that principle, it will be truly awful. But, if this country cannot be saved without giving up that principle- I was about to say I would rather be assassinated on this spot than to surrender it. (Applause.)<sup>39</sup>

Disregarding Lincoln's uncanny premonition of his death, the audience took to these ideas unanimously, and the reception is symbolic of the change in public sentiment. Though Philadelphia is not a representation of the entire nation's sentiment toward the abolition of slavery, it is still a historical marker that provides an insight into how crowds of people that attended political speeches in the original capital of the United States displayed their reception to Lincoln's ideas. This speech was delivered in the same year as his First Inaugural Address. He explicitly laid out the two opposing moral sides of the slavery debate, the only substantial debate.<sup>40</sup> This was the final piece of Lincoln's gradual emancipation; this was

the culmination, the crescendo to his philosophy. He cried for unity; he called for the nation's people to take responsibility for the institutions that belong to them and make a difference with their voices and votes. He influenced the zeitgeist, but he knew that everything was out of his control and that he could lead a horse to water, but he could not force that horse to drink, metaphorically speaking. The Emancipation Proclamation was the legal reflection of Lincoln's belief that the nation had transcended beyond rudimentary ideas on slavery. He believed that the country had now accepted that, under The Declaration and The Constitution, all persons should be liberated from slavery.

### **The Conclusion**

Lincoln has achieved mythological status in the American historical imagination. But Lincoln was no myth. He was a human being with the capacity to misspeak; he possessed the power to love; he experienced the lows and the highs; he doubted his faith and he questioned his self-worth in ways that would be familiar to any human being in any era. His fallibility is what has stamped his name into the fabric of American lore and placed his face on Mount Rushmore. Lincoln once said, "This task of gratitude to our fathers, justice to ourselves, duty to prosperity, and love for our species in general, all imperatively require us to perform." As Americans, we must perform. We must perpetuate the sentiment espoused by Mr. Lincoln for the sake of our species. The Declaration of Independence and the Constitution began the freedom conversation within the newly liberated United States of America. Few men understood these documents to represent the ideals needed to be held by a nation of people, and Abraham Lincoln was one of those men. Interpretations of these documents varied by group, thus spawning differing perceptions of freedom and eventually calling slavery into question—the confrontation that

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Lincoln believed was destined by fate. Abolitionists supported an antislavery understanding of The Constitution, and pro-slavery groups ordained The Constitution to be of the pro-slavery designation. Lincoln understood and distinguished levels of rights, and he was unavailable to compromise at the base level, which was natural rights. He always believed that removing an individual's ability to achieve life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness was a moral evil, and slavery was an institution that perpetrated this moral evil. He knew the issue of slavery to be a moral, philosophical, and ethical battlefield that must be won by persuading public sentiment because war and conflict could potentially break a flowering yet fragile nation. Lincoln set out on a patient journey to persuade public sentiment through speeches, rhetoric, and legal decisions. A gradual approach to emancipation was the only way Lincoln could achieve unity among the nation's public and perpetuate

that unity long after his death. He needed to develop a philosophy based on legal precedent that could withstand the scrutiny of aggressors like Stephen Douglas and Roger B. Taney; He also needed to critically analyze his philosophy for intellectual failure in all aspects of its argument. This meant discerning levels of rights and the application of his philosophy within these levels. Natural rights, citizenship rights, and state rights were all designations where his philosophy needed to be applicable. Lincoln answered all the questions from his counterparts in politics, and he applied his philosophy by never faltering in his position and leading by example. The Dred Scott decision and the Kansas-Nebraska Act provided him with the opportunity to make his philosophy applicable to legal decisions.

Tangible political results shaped the public attitude toward Lincoln as an influential statesman and his road to the White House. On that road, he spoke words of unity and liberty for all that began as provocative ideas but eventually became the framework for the zeitgeist of a nation. The most significant intellectual, political maneuver by an American Statesman culminated in 1863 with the Emancipation Proclamation. He delivered that proclamation with integrity and in congruence with the gradual emancipation philosophy that he dreamt of in 1838 as a young man. He did not name the gradual approach until 1854, but the foundation of his moral position lay in the lines of the Declaration of Independence and the sections of The Constitution. Because of the weight that the confrontation of slavery carried, Lincoln was hyperaware of the societal pulse regarding slavery. Lincoln believed that slavery was a natural evil and that it usurped personal rights that the Constitution afforded to all citizens of the United States regardless of race. This was the public sentiment that all Americans had to perpetuate.



## ENDNOTES

1 Eric Foner, "Preface," in *The Fiery Trial* (W.W. Norton & Company, New York, London, 2010), xix.

2 Eric Foner, *The Fiery Trial*, xvi.

3 JAMES OAKES, *Crooked Path to Abolition: Abraham Lincoln and the Antislavery Constitution* (S.I., NY: WW NORTON, 2021), xxv.

4 Oakes, *The Crooked Path to Abolition*, xxii-xxiii

5 Oakes, *The Crooked Path to Abolition*, xxiii

6 Eric Foner, *The Fiery Trial*, xvii

7 Eric Foner, *The Fiery Trial*, xvii

8 Eric Foner, *The Fiery Trial*, xix

9 James Oakes, *The Crooked Path to Abolition*, xxvii

10 James Oakes, *The Crooked Path to Abolition*, xiii

11 DAVID S. REYNOLDS, *Abe: Abraham Lincoln in His Times* (S.I.: PENGUIN BOOKS, 2021), xiv.

12 Abraham Lincoln, Roy P. Basler, and Don E. Fehrenbacher, *Speeches and Writings. Speeches, Letters, and Miscellaneous Writings, The Lincoln-Douglas Debates* (New York: Library of America, 2009), 328.

13 Abraham Lincoln, *Speeches and Writings. Speeches, Letters, and Miscellaneous Writings, The Lincoln-Douglas Debates*, 328.

14 Ibid, 328.

15 James Oakes, *Natural Rights, Citizenship Rights, State Rights, and Black Rights: Another Look at Lincoln and Race*, (Gilder Institute of American History, 2008), 1.

16 Abraham Lincoln, *Speeches and Writings. Speeches, Letters, and Miscellaneous Writings, The Lincoln-Douglas Debates*, 28.

17 Ibid, 389.

18 Ibid, 398.

19 Ibid, 316.

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid. This specific footnote references where Lincoln openly admits that if enslaved people were freed and integrated into society, there would be a lack of a uniform congruence from the white citizens of America. Lincoln even admits that he doesn't know if he would accept it.

22 James Oakes, *The Crooked Path to Abolition*, xxvii.

23 *Illinois State Register* (Springfield), Aug. 24, 1858; *Chicago Times*, Aug. 22, 1858.

24 Abraham Lincoln, *Speeches and Writings. Speeches, Letters, and Miscellaneous Writings, The Lincoln-Douglas Debates*, 524.

25 Ibid, 524.

26 David Zarefsky, "'Public Sentiment Is Everything': Lincoln's View of Political Persuasion," *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association* 15, no. 2 (1994): pp. 23-40, [https://quod.lib.umich.edu/j/jala/2629860.0015.204/~public-sentiment-is-everything-lincolns-view-of-political?rgn=main;view=fulltext#no te\\_6](https://quod.lib.umich.edu/j/jala/2629860.0015.204/~public-sentiment-is-everything-lincolns-view-of-political?rgn=main;view=fulltext#no te_6).

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid.

31 Abraham Lincoln, *Speeches and Writings. Speeches, Letters, and Miscellaneous Writings, The Lincoln-Douglas Debates*, 227.

32 Ibid.

33 Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage, My Freedom* (Lanham: Start Publishing LLC, 2013), 118.

34 Ibid, 120.

35 Abraham Lincoln, Roy P. Basler, and Don E. Fehrenbacher, *Speeches and Writings. Speeches, Letters, and Miscellaneous Writings, The Lincoln-Douglas Debates* (New York: Library of America, 2009), 17.

36 Ibid, 13.

37 Abraham Lincoln, Roy P. Basler, and Don E. Fehrenbacher, *Speeches and Writings. Speeches, Letters, and Miscellaneous Writings, The Lincoln-Douglas Debates* (New York: Library of America, 2009), 213.

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid, 221.