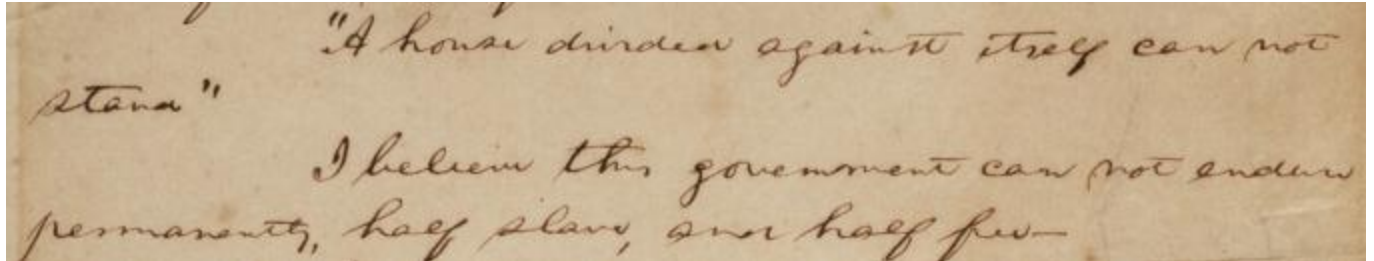


Lincoln and Abolitionism

by Douglas L. Wilson



Fragment of Lincoln's "House Divided" speech, ca. 1857, detail. (Gilder Lehrman Collection)

Abraham Lincoln immortalized himself in American history by the role that he played in abolishing the institution of slavery, but he arrived at this distinction only after a long career of opposition to abolitionism. This at first seems paradoxical, for he had always actively disliked slavery, and he came into national prominence as a politician by strenuously opposing its extension into the territories. However, in the 1850s, with the breakup of the Whig Party, Lincoln parted ways with some of his oldest political associates by deciding to make common cause with anti-slavery activists in the newly formed Republican Party. But he was never an abolitionist, and the question that inevitably presents itself to modern students is, in the words of the Lincoln scholar Don E. Fehrenbacher, "if he hated slavery so much, why did Lincoln not become an abolitionist?"[1]

To answer that question, we can begin by examining Lincoln's attitudes toward slavery and what he, as a politician, proposed should be done about it. Though the historical record has always been reasonably clear, the Great Emancipator legend has had a decidedly distorting effect on our understanding of Lincoln's position, confusing him with those who openly advocated the abolition of slavery. In fact, Lincoln was always keenly aware that slavery, though morally wrong in his eyes, was sanctioned by law, and he frequently acknowledged that the rights of slave owners, both to retain their slaves and to have fugitive slaves returned, were clearly guaranteed in the Constitution. Before the outbreak of civil war, he advocated nothing that would directly challenge those rights. This position sharply distinguished him from abolitionists, many of whom were actively involved in supporting runaway slaves, and all of whom viewed the returning of fugitive slaves as unconscionable, whatever the Constitution might dictate. The most radical abolitionists openly denounced the Constitution for its protection of slavery and repudiated its authority.

Lincoln, by contrast, never put his antipathy for slavery ahead of his allegiance to the Constitution. He admitted privately that he hated to see slaves "hunted down, and caught, and carried back to their stripes," but he classed himself in 1855 with "the great body of the Northern people [who] do crucify their feelings, in order to maintain their loyalty to the constitution and the Union." [2] His public support of the Fugitive Slave Law moved the implacable Boston abolitionist, Wendell Phillips, to label him "the Slave Hound of Illinois." [3] While the common goal of abolitionists was to put an end to slavery everywhere, Lincoln ran for president in 1860 on a platform that promised to leave slavery undisturbed in the states where it already existed.

Perhaps in even starker contrast to most abolitionists, Lincoln did not believe that slaveholders were inherently evil. He argued, rather, that they were, like their northern counterparts, merely products of their environment. "I have no prejudice against the Southern people," he declared in his Peoria speech of 1854:

They are just what we would be in their situation. If slavery did not now exist amongst them, they would not introduce it. If it did now exist amongst us, we should not instantly give it up.

In fact, Lincoln was willing to go even further:

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.[4]

These candid protestations and admissions are evidence of a view of human behavior that Lincoln had formed much earlier. In his Temperance Speech of 1842, he weighed in against heavy-handed reformers in a way that has clear implications for slavery and its reform. The speech took, for its time, a startlingly sympathetic view of drunkards, picturing them mainly as unfortunates, whose addiction had deprived them of the ability to govern their own behavior. Lincoln praised the efforts of the Washingtonians, the society of reformed drunkards whose members, like their modern counterparts in Alcoholics Anonymous, were actively helping fellow sufferers, and he came down hard on those he called the “old reformers” for their lack of charity and their blindness to what makes people willing and able to change:

Another error, as it seems to me, into which the old reformers fell, was, the position that all habitual drunkards were utterly incorrigible, and therefore, must be turned adrift, and damned without remedy, in order that the grace of temperance might abound to the temperate then, and to all mankind some hundred years thereafter. There is in this something so repugnant to humanity, so uncharitable, so cold-blooded and feelingless, that it never did, nor ever can enlist the enthusiasm of a popular cause.[5]

It is easy to see how Lincoln might view the abolitionist approach to the problem of slavery as analogous to the attitudes of the “old reformers,” which were calculated to damn the slaveholders without remedy.

For Lincoln, the agitation and moral posturing of the abolitionists constituted the wrong approach in a democratic society, because it was ultimately incompatible with majority rule. Though slavery was morally wrong, he believed that the founders, by various means, had placed slavery on the path to ultimate extinction. Rather than agitate for its speedy removal, Lincoln thought a more prudent plan would be to keep slavery from spreading so that it would eventually die. Ironically, his adversaries agreed with him. Stephen A. Douglas, in his famous series of debates with Lincoln in 1858, agreed that personal morality was overridden by majority rule, and thus slavery should be allowed wherever voters wanted it. Southerners, in turn, agreed that slavery might expire if it was excluded from territorial expansion, and therefore they seceded from the Union rather than submit.

Once elected president and confronted by the secession of several Southern states, Lincoln again found himself in disagreement with many abolitionists, who were content to let the disaffected states depart in peace. Only with the firing on Fort Sumter did the abolitionists and Lincoln find common ground in resisting the rebellion, but their differences on what to do about slavery soon drove them apart again. Abolitionists argued that the government was justified in divesting rebels of their slaves, but Lincoln insisted on delaying such a measure until sufficient popular support could be mustered, and then he would only consent to emancipation as a strictly military measure, justified by his constitutional war powers as commander in chief. With his Emancipation Proclamation of 1863, Lincoln succeeded in winning over many of the most influential abolitionists, including the man who had once called the Constitution “a covenant with death and an agreement with Hell,” William Lloyd Garrison. By pushing hard for passage of the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution, which outlawed slavery, Lincoln arrived, at long last, at a definitive point of agreement with the abolitionists.

Audio clip provided by [BackStory with the American History Guys](#)

[1] Don E. Fehrenbacher, “Only His Stepchildren,” *Lincoln in Text and Context: Collected Essays* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), 107–08.

[2] Abraham Lincoln to Joshua F. Speed, Aug. 24, 1855, in Roy P. Basler et al., eds., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 9 vols. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 2:320.

[3] Wendell Phillips to William H. Herndon, undated, Douglas L. Wilson and Rodney O. Davis, eds., *Herndon’s Informants: Letters, Interviews, and Statements about Abraham Lincoln* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 704.

[4] Speech at Peoria, Illinois, Oct. 16, 1854, *Collected Works*, 2:255.

[5] *Collected Works*, 1:275.

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