

# WARTS AND ALL

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## **The Real Lincoln:**

### **A New Look at Abraham Lincoln, His Agenda, and an Unnecessary War**

Thomas J. DiLorenzo

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*Reviewed by Robert S. Griffin*

**T**he real Lincoln? You mean he wasn't the martyred American hero who freed the slaves and saved the Union established by the Founding Fathers? That wasn't the real Lincoln? No it wasn't, offers Thomas DiLorenzo in this worthwhile and readable book.

So then who was the real Lincoln? For one thing, we learn from Professor DiLorenzo (he is a professor of economics at Loyola College in Maryland) that Lincoln was what today would be called a "white supremacist." "There is a physical difference between the two [white and black races], which, in my judgment, will forever forbid their living together upon the footing of perfect equality.... I am in favor of the race to which I belong, having the superior position." On another occasion, Lincoln said flatly that he believed that the Negro race is inferior to the white race, and added that Mexicans are "mongrels."

And Lincoln wasn't alone in his beliefs. Among several examples DiLorenzo provides is the Concord, New Hampshire *Democrat Standard* editor who wrote, "The proposition that the Negro is equal by nature, physically and mentally, to the white man, seems to be so absurd and preposterous, that we cannot conceive how it can be entertained by any intelligent and rational white man."

Apart from the validity of what Lincoln and this editor thought, it is useful to ponder how the flow of accepted public discourse has narrowed in the last century and a half. If someone did happen to think this way now, they wouldn't dare announce it to the world. Such is freedom of expression in our time.

Lincoln, DiLorenzo tells us, was also a white separatist. More than wanting blacks free, he wanted them gone. During the Civil War he was asked what should be done with the blacks. "Send them to Liberia," he replied. Lincoln wanted to colonize every last black to Africa, Haiti, or Central America: "I cannot make it better known than it already is, that I strongly favor colonization." He termed the elimination of every black from American soil "a glorious consummation" and "the true solution to the race question."

And Lincoln didn't leave his colonization idea at just talk. He got Congress to appropriate funds for colonization and had his Commissioner of Emigration and Secretary of Interior supervise its implementation. Lincoln's colonization plan didn't come off, however, due to inept administration and mismanagement of funds. It can be presumed that the vast majority of readers of this book are happy that Lincoln's scheme didn't work out. A few readers, though, might harbor the thought that America would have been better off if it had.

As I was reading about the colonization program I was reminded of our tendency to think that whatever happened in history was inevitable. The story becomes familiar, and with familiarity comes the impression of immutability — it had to happen that way. Well, of course, it didn't have to happen that way. Colonization might have happened, but it didn't because of what people did and didn't do at that time.

The lesson in this is that there are contemporary issues—Third World immigration, say—and how these issues will be resolved is up in the air; it depends on what people now alive do. The resolution of these issues will someday be called history, and it will seem to people in the future that it had to have worked out that way. And as with colonization, however a contemporary issue works out, the consequences of that state of affairs will be felt for hundreds of years, because one thing affects another, and that affects two other things, and they affect eight other things, and so on.

And a last point, there may be only one time to resolve a particular issue. There certainly is not going to be colonization for blacks now. There was one opportunity to do that, and it has passed. History isn't like sports. If you lose a ballgame today, there is another game tomorrow. What greatly increases the stakes in whatever cultural or social issue you care about is if you lose that historical game, it may well never be replayed.

One of the themes in DiLorenzo's book is that whites in those days weren't big on sharing their lives with blacks, something that in our time is taken to be an unimpeachable good (and a punishable thought crime if you seem to disagree, re: Trent Lott). For example, Illinois, Ohio, and Oregon amended their state constitutions to prohibit the immigration of blacks. The amendments were approved by public referenda, passing by margins of two to one in Illinois, three to one in Indiana, and eight to one in Oregon. (No public referenda on immigration in our time.) Asked for the reasoning behind his state's action,

Illinois Senator Lyman Trumbull responded, "Our people want nothing to do with the Negroes." One Ohio congressman threatened blacks that if they tried to get into Ohio they would be met by "men with muskets on their shoulders."

Of course, in our enlightened age, we all know that these actions and statements were abhorrent. DiLorenzo makes clear that he has no time for what these people did, as he leads off this section of the book with, "Northerners discriminated against blacks in cruel and inhumane ways during the 1850s." Indeed, what made these people presume that they had the right to decide who would live among them? How could they even think of controlling entry into their communities, and particularly how could they justify not wanting to mingle all day every day with blacks? It's hard to comprehend.

Of course, any consideration of these limitations on immigration is one-sided because the dead can't talk. If he could be brought back to life, I wonder what the aforementioned Senator Trumbull would say about the amendment to keep blacks out of Illinois. I could imagine him saying, "I just took a tour of Chicago. Hell, we were right."

Not only was Lincoln what we would have to classify as a dreaded "racist," just as grating on our contemporary sensibilities, he was openly a white advocate. With reference to Nebraska and the other new territories, he said, "We want them for the homes of free white people." Lincoln came right out and said he wanted something for white people—imagine the outrage if some politician today ventured to say such a thing! It would be one thing if Lincoln had been alone with these kinds of sentiments, but he wasn't. *New York Tribune* editor Horace Greeley wrote, "All the unoccupied territory... shall be preserved for the benefit of the white Caucasian race." Our man Senator Trumbull referred to the Republican Party as "the white man's party." Representative David Wilmot of Pennsylvania announced that he wanted to preserve "a rich inheritance... for my own race and color." And a last example, a Niles, Michigan newspaper editor opined, "This government was made for the benefit of the white race... not for Negroes." Reading this, I asked myself, who are some white advocates now that aren't vilified and excluded from the mainstream of American life? None came to mind. How'd that happen?

If Lincoln wasn't all that enamored of blacks, then what prompted him to issue the Emancipation Proclamation? DiLorenzo informs us that it certainly wasn't a desire to free any slaves. The Proclamation's purpose was to force the secessionists to remain in the Union. "What I do about slavery, and the colored race, I do because I believe it helps to save the Union," said Lincoln. He thought that the Proclamation might incite a slave revolt, because mostly there were only white women and children on the plantations since the men had gone off to war. As it turned out, the Proclamation resulted in a problem for Lincoln. Many Northern soldiers felt betrayed. They had assumed they were fighting for the Union and were repelled by the thought of dying by the tens of thousands for black strangers they cared nothing about.

The subtitle of DiLorenzo's book refers to "an unnecessary war." What was unnecessary about the Civil War? Six hundred twenty thousand people died in that war. Standardizing for today's population, that is the equivalent of five million deaths – seventeen times the number of Americans killed in World War II and a hundred times the number killed in Vietnam. One out of every four Southern white men between the ages of twenty and forty perished in the war. Hundreds of thousands more on both sides were maimed. Forty percent of the nation's economy was destroyed. And it didn't have to happen?

To the extent it was about slavery, no, it didn't have to happen, writes DiLorenzo. Slavery, he points out, had been a normal state of affairs in the world for three thousand years. Yet in a century slavery had ended peacefully in every country but the United States through some form of gradual abolition involving compensation to slave owners. Everybody else but us figured out how to end slavery without bloodshed. What was the problem?

The problem, according to DiLorenzo, was that for Lincoln the war wasn't about slavery. And it wasn't about saving the Union per se either. It was about consolidating power in Washington, D.C. Stephen Douglas had Lincoln pegged. During a senatorial debate with Lincoln, he said Lincoln wanted to "impose on the nation a uniformity of local laws and institutions and a moral homogeneity dictated by the central government [that would] place at defiance the intentions of the republic's founders." The threat of secession was a powerful check on the expansionist activities of the federal government, and, of course, actual secession represented their defeat. "Saving the Union" was Lincoln's euphemism for destroying the decentralized, voluntary union of states that had existed up to that time.

The Civil War resulted in the death of federalism and, arguably, individual freedom in America. The consequences of that war live powerfully with us today: Namely, the shift from a society based on liberty to one grounded in egalitarianism and "democracy" (the politicizing of virtually all of life). Writes DiLorenzo:

Government became more militaristic and began a quest for empire; myriad socialistic income and wealth-transfer schemes were adopted...; and the Jeffersonian notion "that government is best which governs least" was abandoned in favor of today's philosophy that nothing – not even the rules of golf – should be beyond the control of the federal government.

Lincoln stopped at nothing to win his victory, including the violation of rules of warfare that all nations at that time considered worthy of being followed by civilized people. It was considered a war crime to attack defenseless cities and towns and plunder and destroy civilian property. Women and children, the elderly and sick, and those who offered no resistance were to be exempted from harm. The respected Swiss jurist Emmerich de Vattel had written that occupying soldiers who destroy property, farms, and livestock should be regarded as "savage barbarians."

But then there was Union Colonel C. C. Walcutt, whose men burned the entire town of Randolph, Tennessee to the ground except for one house to mark where the town had once existed. And there was the devastation of Meridian, Mississippi: "For five days, ten thousand of our men worked hard and with a will, in that work of destruction," wrote Union general William Tecumseh Sherman, "with axes, sledges, crowbars, clawbars, and with fire, and I have no hesitation in pronouncing the work well done. Meridian... no longer exists." The Union army stripped farms bare and destroyed homes in Vicksburg, Mississippi, and its citizens had to resort to living in caves and eating rats and dogs. Sherman described the corpses of women and young children in the streets of Atlanta as "a beautiful sight."

Over the years, I have often heard derisive comments about people who "are still fighting the Civil War." Especially after reading this book, my response to those people is: God bless them.

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*Robert S. Griffin is the author of **One Sheaf, One Vine: Racially Conscious White Americans Talk about Race**, which can be obtained from ([www.1stbooks.com](http://www.1stbooks.com) and [Amazon.com](http://Amazon.com)).*

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