



Lincoln Lore

Number 1780

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June, 1987

WHAT DO YOUNG PEOPLE KNOW ABOUT LINCOLN?

Occasionally we receive calls or letters from people who worry that a book or a film will hurt Abraham Lincoln's reputation. Can't something be done to stop them, they ask? Of course, nothing can be done and it never really matters. No single work has ever seriously threatened Lincoln's consistently high station in American national memory.

Now something really does threaten Lincoln's place, and we have never received a call or letter about it. The problem is one of growing national amnesia. It has been addressed in several recent books, and the press has called attention to it repeatedly. Abraham Lincoln himself is not the problem, but he and his times often provide the most vivid symbol of it. The *International Herald Tribune*, for example, focused on the problem of cultural illiteracy among youths in the United States by noting that over two-thirds of all American seventeen-year-olds could not place the Civil War in the proper half-century.

One man's symbol is another's personal catastrophe, and that statistic should make all readers of *Lincoln Lore* shudder.

It is a powerful statistic and one worth examining closely. We can now do that with the recent publication of Diane Ravitch and Chester E. Finn, Jr.'s book, *What Do Our 17-Year-Olds Know? A Report on the First National Assessment of History and Literature* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987). The National Endowment for the Humanities funded a test devised by the Educational Excellence Network and the National Assessment of Educational Progress. It was administered in the spring of 1986. It consisted of 141 history questions, 121 literature questions, and a questionnaire on the student's personal background. The questions were multiple choice. 7,812 students, divided equally between the sexes took the test. Using the background questionnaire, NAEP weighted the results statistically to make them representative of the general population. 7,812 represents a large sample, and the results are statistically highly reliable.

Here is the most horrifying result for *Lincoln Lore* readers:

When was the Civil War?	
— Before 1750	3.7%
— 1750-1800	22.6%
— 1800-1850	38.4%

— 1850-1900	32.2%
— 1900-1950	2.5%
— After 1950	0.6%

The question hardly required pinpoint accuracy. To miss the time of the Civil War by fifty years would be to make the war fought only with sailing vessels or, at the other extreme, in khaki uniforms with trenches and machine guns.

Confusion of technological eras clearly was not the problem. The students knew it wasn't a twentieth-century war, that J.E.B. Stuart wasn't a tank commander, that U.S. Grant did not fly in airplanes, and that Lincoln didn't call his generals on the telephone. They have a fundamental grasp of the chronology of technology. They knew it belonged to another technological era, but as to what political era, they hardly had a clue beyond the fact that the war was not fought before the United States was a country (the proposition embodied in the first answer, and wisely passed over by 96% of the students).

Every teacher of history has heard the commonest complaint about high-school history courses: "it was all just dates." There

is a lot more to history than dates, of course, but there is absolutely nothing to history without them. Chronology is history's fundamental organizing principle and dictates its methods.

If students cannot place the Civil War in the proper half-century, they cannot grasp much about history except gross categories of technological innovation, the sort of periodization used in anthropology. A large majority of the students missed the date of the Civil War by over a decade. Assuming that almost all who guessed 1800-1850 as the proper half-century were thinking that the 1840s were the proper time, one can see how muddled their understanding must be. A Civil War fought before 1850 would be fought with cavalry charges. Railroads would play a small role. But technology does not provide the proper focus.

Think, instead, of the political chaos provided by such a view. What happens to the Mexican War, the territorial acquisitions from which provided the focus of the political issues that led to war? Stephen Douglas would be alive for the whole war, to lead the loyal opposition, but he



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FIGURE 1. Young Abraham Lincoln.



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FIGURE 2. About a third of America's 17-year-olds wouldn't be able to guess what document these men are discussing.

would not have suggested the Kansas-Nebraska Act. Nor would there be a Dred Scott decision or a raid by John Brown.

Naturally, Abraham Lincoln's fate as a figure of historical memory is closely tied to the Civil War. When the students were asked to place his presidential term in the proper twenty-year period, only 24.7% could do so (1860-1880). 1800-1820, 1820-1840, and 1840-1860 were nearly equal competitors (that is, each was designated by more than 20% of the students). Boys, incidentally, performed far better on this question than girls. Even the more knowledgeable students know little about Abraham Lincoln. Of the seventeen-year-olds who scored in the top quarter on history questions, 30% still could not place the Civil War in the right half-century.

What else don't they know about Lincoln? 32% don't know that he wrote the Emancipation Proclamation. As for knowing the purpose of the proclamation, only 38.2% did, but this was, and Ravitch and Finn are quick to admit it, a difficult question. 41.5% of the students thought the Emancipation Proclamation ended slavery within the United States, rather than freeing the slaves in Confederate territories not controlled by the Union.

This is a difficult question, in a way, but the wrong answers once again prove that Lincoln's problem is not hostile attacks but ignorance. Some historians in the Lincoln field have been concerned about the prevalence of cynical interpretations. They suspected that the smart-alecky interpretation of the Emancipation Proclamation — that it was a document which didn't really free anybody because it included slavery only where the Union could not reach it — was being widely taught and was giving modern students a cynical view of Lincoln. This is wrong. Nothing is being widely taught — or rather, widely learned. Students' heads are not filled with the wrong ideas about Lincoln; they have very few ideas about Lincoln of any kind. At least it can be said that 73.9% of them recognize the beginning of the Gettysburg Address.

It is a rare occasion when the pages of *Lincoln Lore* are used to urge the purchase and reading of a book that is not a history book, but one should see *What Do Our 17-Year-Olds Know?* The

results for other figures, eras, and concepts are equally gripping.

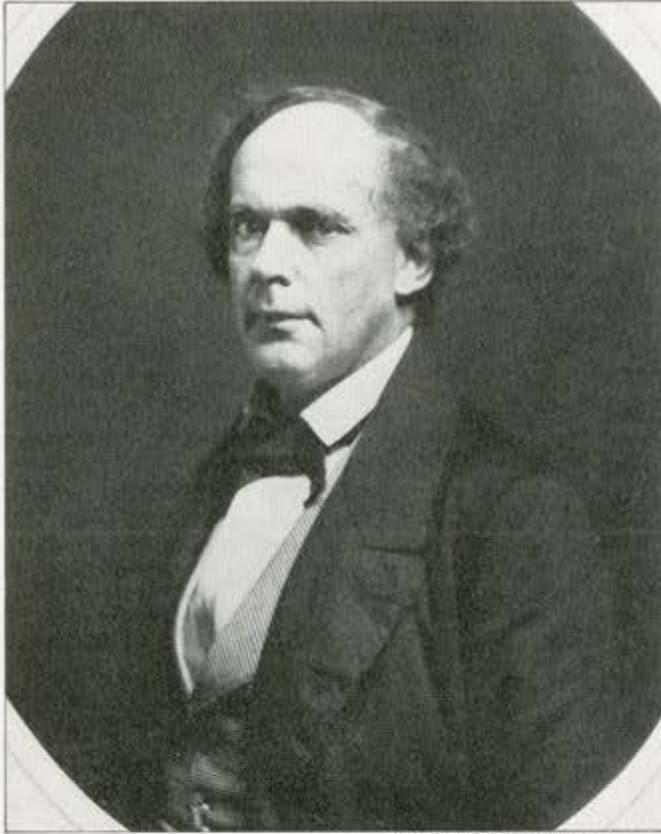
Readers should not look to the universities to rectify the situation once they get these students into their intellectual embrace. The students are pretty clearly lost to history by the time they get to college. In fact, one of the biggest "losers" among college disciplines over the recent decades has been history. Bachelor's degrees in history, as reported by Thomas V. DiBacco in the *Baltimore Sun* on April 26, 1987, have fallen from 43,386 in 1970 to 18,201 in 1981. College teachers of history lost well over half their audience in a little over a decade. Even the much-battered foreign languages did not lose majors at such a rapid rate.

The decline of history — and with it the decline of Abraham Lincoln — has been precipitous. As far as anyone knows from reliable statistics, there are no bright spots on the horizon. It is not getting better. There is no consensus on what to do. There is no consensus on the cause. There is only the irrefragable evidence that Abraham Lincoln is being forgotten. He is not suffering cynical interpretation or hostile attacks. He is being ignored.

FREEING THEMSELVES

The mention of cynical interpretations of the Emancipation Proclamation in the first little article in this issue of *Lincoln Lore* brings to mind John Hay's account of the aftermath of the issuance of the proclamation. It is a vivid corrective to any lapse into cynicism about this document.

Cynical interpretations have been around from September 22, 1862, the day Lincoln announced the so-called preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, to this day. American historical writing on the proclamation, however, was not dominated by a cynical view until the 1930s and 1940s, with the development of what has come to be called "Revisionism" in Civil War history. Those historians believed that emancipation, as it was embodied in the historic document announced on September



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FIGURE 3. Salmon P. Chase.

22, 1862, was not what President Lincoln really wanted. His plan, as James G. Randall, at once the most famous revisionist and the greatest Lincoln biographer, repeatedly told his readers, was something entirely different. Lincoln desired gradual emancipation with compensation to the owners for their loss of slave property.

From such a view, it was not a giant step to the view that Abraham Lincoln did not desire emancipation at all, that it had to be forced upon him either by the vengeful white radicals in the Republican party or by the slaves themselves. It is a widely held view today that the slaves emancipated themselves and, though the corollary is rarely spelled out explicitly, that the president hastened to put a pompous stamp of approval from white officialdom on these acts over which he had no control.

The "self emancipation" view, in its rawest and most anti-Lincoln form, cannot be said to dominate history-writing the way revisionism did. But it is one major thrust of interpretation these days. At a recent meeting to plan the Civil War exhibits at a major museum, for example, some people argued for leaving major artifacts associated with the Emancipation Proclamation out of the exhibit because the document did nothing and the slaves freed themselves.

There is not room here to address this problem in any systematic way, but a little gust of fresh air from the era when the Emancipation Proclamation still seemed liberating might help historians clear their heads and think a bit more sharply about this. John Hay's diary gives this refreshing account of the immediate aftermath of the issuance of the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, focusing on a band serenade to celebrate the president's act on the night of September 24:

I told the President of the serenade that was coming and asked if he would make any remarks. He said, "No," but he did say half a dozen words, & said them with great grace and dignity. I spoke to him about the editorials in the leading papers. He said he had studied the matter so long that he knew more about it than they did.

At Governor Chase's there was some talking after the serenade. Chase and Clay made speeches and the crowd was in a glorious humor. After the crowd went away to force Mr.

Bates to say something, a few old fogies staid at the Governor's and drank wine. Chase spoke earnestly of the Proclamation. He said, "This was a most wonderful history of an insanity of a class that the world had ever seen. If the slaveholders had staid in the Union they might have kept the life in their institution for many years to come. That what no party and no public feeling in the North could ever have hoped to touch they had madly placed in the very path of destruction." They all seemed to feel a sort of new and exhilarated life; they breathed freer; the Pres^{ts} Procⁿ had freed them as well as the slaves. They gleefully and merrily called each other and themselves abolitionists, and seemed to enjoy the novel sensation of appropriating that horrible name.

If one's ideas of the Emancipation Proclamation were shaped only by the more cynical strands of historical interpretation in recent years, it would be difficult to appreciate this scene: the president, prickly, his back up, knowing he had done the right thing whatever the press said; the innocently cheering crowd in "glorious humor"; and the worldly old politicians at Salmon P. Chase's house, "gleeful" and "merry," teasing each other about having become abolitionists. If one takes a more proper view of this, the mightiest act of the Lincoln administration, then the scene is almost enough to bring tears to the eyes.

WHO WROTE AMERICAN BASTILE?

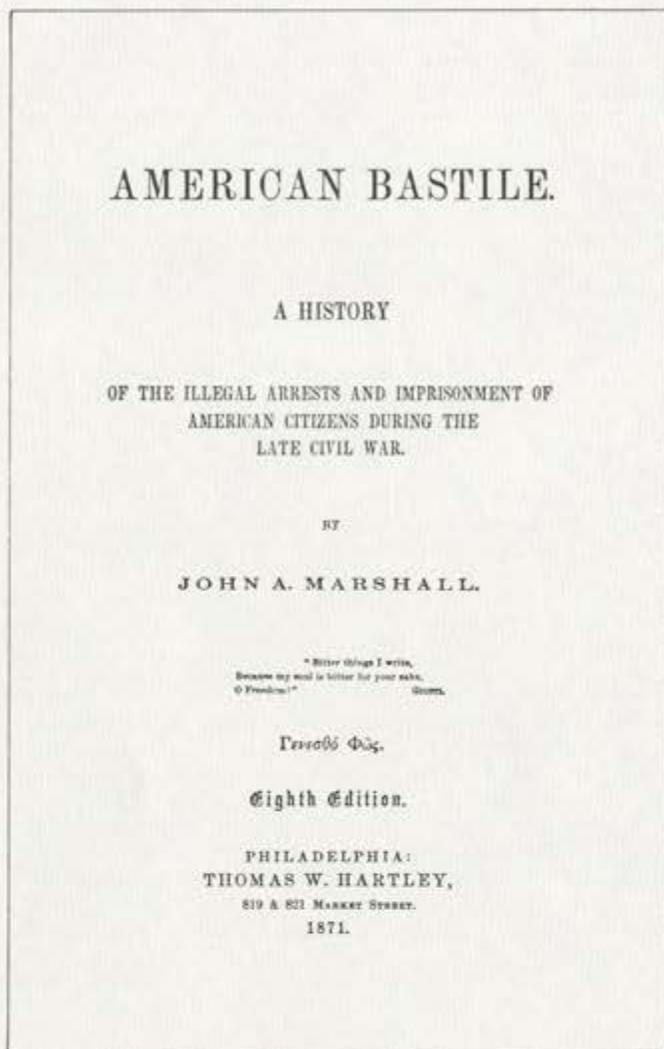
Any person who frequents used book stores searching for works on Lincoln and the Civil War has encountered *American Bastile: A History of the Illegal Arrests and Imprisonment of American Citizens during the Late Civil War*. First published in 1869, the book eventually went through some thirty-four printings. The 1885 edition proclaimed itself to be the twenty-seventh thousand. Whether one chooses to believe such claims or not, the ubiquitous presence of the book in antiquarian shops is proof enough that *American Bastile* enjoyed a genuinely broad circulation.

The author of this popular anti-Lincoln work was one John A. Marshall, but who, exactly, was he? Historian Frank Klement, the leading student of Copperhead literature, identifies him as "a Marylander who was arrested arbitrarily in 1861." There is record of one J. A. Marshall arrested in January 1862, incarcerated in the Old Capitol Prison in Washington, and paroled in March. Yet this description does not match perfectly Klement's description, and there is evidence that much of the book was written by someone else.

Marshall claimed to have been designated the historian of the Association of State Prisoners. In the only reference to such an organization found outside the pages of *American Bastile* itself, the State Prisoners Association appears to have been founded around February 1863 by Dennis A. Mahoney, an Iowa newspaper editor and victim of military arrest early in the Civil War. Mahoney wrote one of the earliest books to denounce military arrests of civilians in the Civil War, *The Prisoner of State*, published in New York by George W. Carlton in 1863. Much of the text of *American Bastile* is identical, or nearly so, to that in *The Prisoner of State*.

For example, Mahoney's book contains on page 110 a chapter on the "Orders of the War Department on Which American Freeman (?) Were Kidnapped and Imprisoned — Suspension of the Habeas Corpus." Appendix E of *American Bastile* retained the same heading but eliminated the cutesy question mark after "Freemen." Three long sentences follow which are identical to Mahoney's. *American Bastile* then omitted a Mahoney paragraph, quoted the order in question, and moved on to Appendix F. The degree of resemblance is well illustrated here:

[Mahoney:] On the same day another order was issued, which among other things, suspended the writ of *habeas corpus*; not by authority of Congress as required by the Constitution, nor even by the President, granting that he had the authority to do so, which the writer does not, but by Edwin M. Stanton, who was holding a mere statutory office, and who at most had the right to exercise only such powers as the Statute creating the office gave him authority to do.



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FIGURE 4. Title page of *American Bastille*.

But here nevertheless is his order suspending the writ of *habeas corpus*. . . .

[Marshall:] On the same day another order was issued, which, among other things, suspended the writ of *habeas corpus*, not by authority of Congress, as required by the Constitution, nor even by the President — granting he had the authority to do so, which we do not — but by Edwin M. Stanton, who was holding a mere statutory office, and who at most had the right to exercise only such powers as the statute creating the office gave him authority to do. But here, nevertheless, is his order suspending the writ of *habeas corpus*. . . .

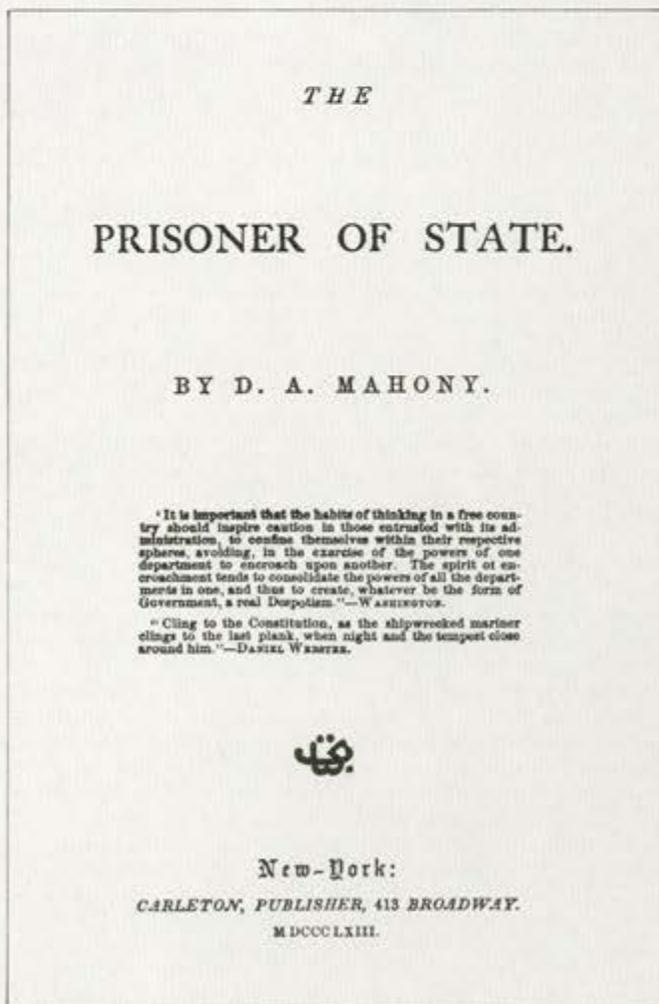
Most of what follows to Appendix I was copied from Mahony's book.

Close similarities can be found in Marshall's "The Old Capitol Prison: Its History and Incidents" and Mahony's "Description of Room No. 13, and Its Furniture." Beginning on page 321 of *American Bastille* and on page 151 of *The Prisoner of State*, one finds long sections of nearly identical language. Marshall even retained Mahony's praise of John C. Calhoun as a "revered champion of liberty" — a point perhaps better left out of a post-Civil War book, when it was tactically wiser to praise liberty than the architects of Southern sectionalism. There are occasional minor changes of Mahony's basic text. For example, "the euphonious negro village of Swampoodle" became in Marshall's book "the negro village with the euphonious name of Swampoodle." And the present tense of the 1863 book was changed to the past tense in the post-war book.

Of course, a great deal of material appears in *American Bastille* which is not present in the earlier and briefer work. It is true, moreover, that Mahony would hardly have been hostile to the purpose of Marshall's book, and might willingly have blessed the plagiarisms in a good cause. On the other hand, Marshall is so shadowy a figure that one wonders how much of the book he really wrote. And the fact that Marshall lifted the section of Mahony's book on Old Capitol Prison seems curious, too. For if Marshall is the J. A. Marshall who was imprisoned in Old Capitol Prison himself, why did he have to borrow Mahony's reminiscence?

Certainly Mahony did not write all of *American Bastille*. Although he had been in New York at the founding of the association of former political prisoners, by 1865 he returned to Dubuque, Iowa, where he had been the editor of the *Herald* newspaper before his arrest in 1862. Professor Klement says that Mahony "had been confined in Fort Lafayette as a 'guest' of the government the last four months of 1862," but as Mahony's own book states, he was a prisoner in Old Capitol Prison from mid-August to mid-November 1862. Indeed, Professor Klement says on the next page of his sketch of Mahony in *The Copperheads in the Middle West* that *The Prisoner of State* described Mahony's experiences in the Old Capitol Prison. Mahony served as sheriff of Dubuque County, moved later to St. Louis to edit a newspaper, and returned to Dubuque in 1871. He died there in 1878 while editor of the *Dubuque Telegraph*.

(To be continued)



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FIGURE 5. Title page of *The Prisoner of State*.