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THE MYTH OF FREEDOM IN SAFIRE

by Mark E. Neely, Jr.

A myth is not merely a story that happens to be untrue; otherwise myths would not have such persistence and power. Webster's describes a myth as a "traditional story of ostensibly historical events that serves to unfold part of the world view of a people." This is aptly put, for in dealing with myths the historian comes into conflict with "tradition" and "world views," powerful forces not easily changed by scholarly articles.

I have recently seen evidence of a myth about Abraham Lincoln at work that will clearly require more than a few such articles to destroy. It does not come to mind as one of the fixtures of Lincoln Mythology, like the drafting of the Gettysburg Address on the back of an envelope, but it is widely held and — the evidence here will show — doggedly believed in. This is the myth that the Emancipation Proclamation was, by intention and to an important degree, an act of foreign policy.

The point here is not to refute the myth but to reveal its persistence. A recent article brought it to my attention. I was reading a review of James M. McPherson's *Battle Cry of Freedom* in the October 1988 issue of the magazine *Military History*. The reviewer, Michael Marshall, focused particularly on the impact of the Battle of Antietam. Along with turning back Robert E. Lee's invasion of the North, it also led to the announcement of the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation on September 22, 1862, five days after the battle. "Ending slavery," said reviewer Marshall, "became a Northern war goal two years into the conflict, when Lincoln foresightedly appreciated its political advantages, among them reducing the chance of European diplomatic recognition for the South." Later in the review, Marshall again described the motivations behind the proclamation, and one of them was to "create a moral distinction between North and South that virtually snuffed out Confederate hopes for public British support."

Now, I could not remember that McPherson had said any such thing in his book. So I went back to it, looked in the index under Emancipation Proclamation, and read closely what McPherson wrote. He did not say that Lincoln was looking

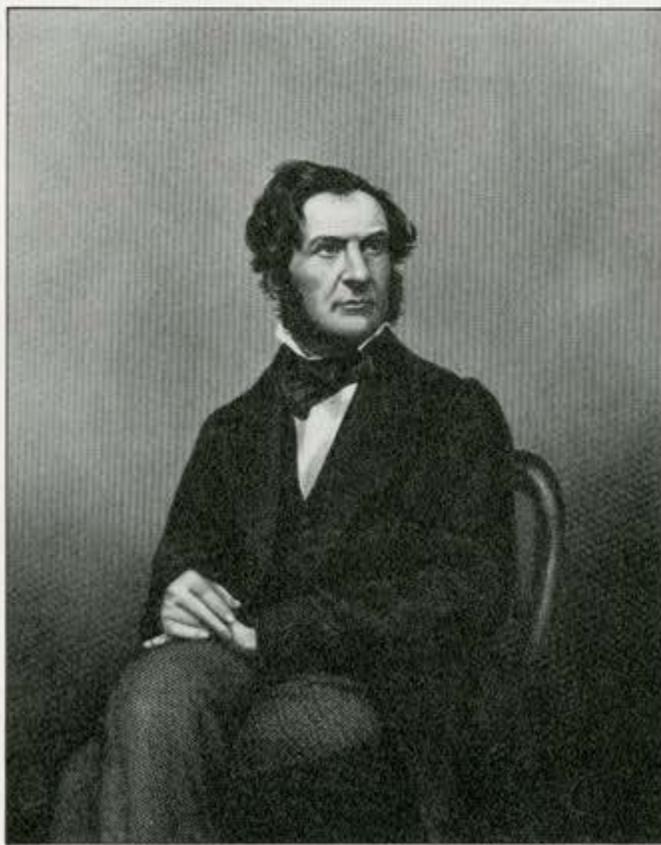
especially to the advantages to be gained in European sentiment by emancipation. In fact, he hardly mentioned it. Instead, McPherson, relying on Gideon Welles' recollections of Lincoln's first discussion of the subject, accurately depicted a president wholly absorbed with the domestic implications of such an act:

As Welles recorded the conversation, Lincoln said that this question had "occupied his mind and thoughts day and night" for several weeks. He had decided that emancipation was "a military necessity, absolutely essential to the preservation of the Union. We must free the slaves or be ourselves subdued. The slaves were undeniably an element of strength to those who had their service, and we must decide whether that element should be with us or against us." Lincoln brushed aside the argument of unconstitutionality. This was a war, and as a commander in chief he could order seizure of enemy slaves just as surely as he could order destruction of enemy railroads. "The rebels . . . could not at the same time throw off the Constitution and invoke its aid. Having made war on the Government, they were subject to

the incidents and calamities of war." The border states "would do nothing" on their own; indeed, perhaps it was not fair to ask them to give up slavery while the rebels retained it. Therefore "the blow must fall first and foremost on [the rebels]. . . . Decisive and extensive measures must be adopted. . . . We wanted the army to strike more vigorous blows. The Administration must set an example, and strike at the heart of the rebellion."

Secretary of State William H. Seward was also present on this famous buggy ride when Lincoln first revealed his intentions in regard to slavery, yet the president did not say that emancipation was "a diplomatic necessity." Nor did McPherson add this unspoken consideration to his reconstruction of Lincoln's thoughts.

McPherson tells the rest of the familiar history of the proclamation's origins. When on July 22 Lincoln first informed the full cabinet of his intention to issue a proclamation, the contrary argument that prevailed came from the Secretary of State, who feared it would be interpreted



From the Louis A. Warren Lincoln Library and Museum

FIGURE 1. William E. Gladstone.

as a sign of weakness rather than strength. The administration had to wait for a battlefield victory. In the meantime, Lincoln was forced to mislead the public. When on September 13 a group of antislavery clergymen met with him, Lincoln, as two of the men of the cloth remembered it, admitted that emancipation would "weaken the rebels by drawing off their laborers" and "would help us in Europe, and convince them that we are incited by something more than ambition." But he appeared to suggest that such a measure would be embarrassingly unenforceable in the present state of Union military fortunes.

As a matter of fact, the actual announcement of the preliminary proclamation later in September coincided with a period of high British interest in mediating the American conflict, but that was an accident. The timing of the proclamation was dictated purely by the occurrence of the Battle of Antietam, not by world events. All along, British Prime Minister Lord Palmerston, as McPherson notes, held but one criterion for recognition: "establishment of southern nationhood as truth and fact." He told the foreign secretary that the outcome in Maryland "must have a great effect on the state of affairs. If the Federals sustain a great defeat, they may be at once ready for mediation, and the iron should be struck while it is hot. If, on the other hand, they should have the best of it, we may wait awhile and see what may follow." The battle itself was significant for that determination, of course, but the Emancipation Proclamation, which followed it, was not. Palmerston, in fact, regarded that document as a piece of contemptible "trash". But of the military campaign, he wrote, "These last battles in Maryland have rather got the North up again." Great Britain did not intrude.

As for Lincoln's own motivations on the day of issuance, September 22, McPherson says accurately that the president was simply living up to his summer promise to the cabinet — and to God. McPherson scrupulously points out that in England "tories and some liberals" saw the document as ineffectual, that the "conservative British press affected both to abhor and ridicule the measure," and that only antislavery Britons recognized its truly liberating nature. But the Confederacy's loss of her best chance for British intervention was a battlefield matter. McPherson adds that the Union victory "had done more" than stave off intervention for now: "by enabling Lincoln to issue the Emancipation Proclamation the battle also ensured that Britain would think twice about intervening against a government fighting for freedom as well as Union." That is the only time McPherson linked the proclamation and foreign opinion in his text. Most of the myth came from the reviewer's head and not from the pages of *Battle Cry of Freedom*.

Seeing this curious phenomenon of a reviewer learning lessons that were not in the book under review, impressed me with the importance of an earlier presentation of the myth, in William Safire's novel *Freedom*. When I first read that book, I shrugged off the misinterpretation of emancipation, not much caring since it appeared in a piece of fiction. But the persistence of the idea has led me back to Safire's text. After all, the scenes dealing with the Emancipation Proclamation, are surely keys to the whole book. The very title, *Freedom*, is suggested by the Emancipation Proclamation, though, as readers of the book know, the title is ironic, for Safire holds, with other popular writers like Gore Vidal, that Lincoln crushed liberty in the North by his system of arbitrary arrests for disloyalty. The ironic importance of the Emancipation Proclamation also makes it the concluding event of the novel.

The key scene, then, is the one in which Lincoln, riding on horseback to the soldiers' home, after he has learned of the Confederate setback at Antietam, mulls over in his mind the pros and cons of giving the blacks freedom. It is the key scene in another way as well. When Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., interviewed Safire for *American Heritage* magazine, he asked him an important question: if, as a historical novelist, Safire was so keen on getting the history right that he supplied the novel with endnotes and bibliography, why did he not write a history, pure and simple? Safire explained: "I think you can get at the truth in a novel without the hangups of a historian. You are freer to say what was in Salmon P. Chase's mind when he did not embrace emancipation . . . after he had seemed to be for emancipation all along. Historians can only touch on

motives; they can't really say, 'This is what motivated him.' Novelists can."

From the climactic scene in which Lincoln decides on emancipation, then, the novel gets its title and the historical novel gets its test as a form superior to history. Here is Lincoln's mind at work, as Safire saw it:

Walking his horse, reins in his good hand, holding his throbbing wrist high to alleviate the pain, Lincoln was aware that he was making a case for issuing the two proclamations [one on emancipation and another on habeas corpus] right away. Still, the blatantly unconstitutional seizure of property troubled him: of the Founders, Adams and Jefferson had been abroad when the slavery compromise was made at the Constitutional Convention, but Washington and Madison were present; was it now for Abraham Lincoln, elected by forty percent of the people, and after having solemnly promised in his Inaugural not to strike at slavery where it already existed to break that compromise?

Yes, he reckoned it was, because otherwise the Union would dissolve. The governments of England and France were fixing to recognize the Confederacy — Gladstone, Chancellor of the Exchequer, had said as much recently. That would give Jeff Davis the means and method to buy arms, to break the blockade, to set up in business as a country. But by freeing the South's slaves, Lincoln would embarrass the British government in the eyes of its own people. Prime Minister Palmerston might have to stay put, at least for another year.

And here is the myth in Safire's mind that was never in Lincoln's. For William E. Gladstone gave his famous Newcastle speech, declaring that Jefferson Davis had created a nation, on October 7, 1862, over two weeks after Abraham Lincoln had issued the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation.

In truth, Gladstone's speech is proof that emancipation turned out to be unimportant to British opinion, for the great liberal leader decided to say publicly that Jefferson Davis had succeeded after the news of emancipation reached Great Britain; several British newspapers carried the news as early as October 6. Besides Gladstone repeated the point in a speech in York four days later.

It is difficult to see the superiority of getting inside Lincoln's mind here: the president could hardly have been thinking of what had not yet occurred. Instead, Safire has thrust the foreign policy myth into Lincoln's head.

This is, in fact, typical of *Freedom*, for the whole book is an attempt to further a myth first articulated in its fascinating modern guise by the great literary critic Edmund Wilson, quoting Confederate Vice-President Alexander H. Stephens, who said of Lincoln that "the Union with him in sentiment rose to the sublimity of a religious mysticism." Wilson depicted Lincoln as a ruthless nationalist who forged the Union even as he crushed the freedom of white Northerners by arbitrary arrests. The Wilson influence is easily detected in *Freedom*, not only from its overall point but also from its telltale language, betraying Safire's intellectual debt to Wilson. For example, on page 66, Montgomery Blair reflected on his own toughening influence and that of his father, Francis P. Blair, on the president. "Father had worked," Safire writes, "on Lincoln in private, using the Jackson precedents, and Monty had himself worked on Lincoln in Cabinet, stressing his duty never to give up federal authority anywhere, an idea to which the new Chief Executive, happily for the Union, seemed almost mystically attached." That "mystically" comes to the modern reader right out of Alexander Stephens, via Wilson. Likewise, on page 496, Salmon P. Chase says of Lincoln: "He keeps talking about 'the Union' as if it had some mystical influence, but I don't think he has the foggiest notion about what this war is demonstrating in terms of national power."

Abraham Lincoln had hardly a mystical bone in his body, and his political thought was particularly far removed from the ideas usually associated with political mysticism: the conservative political thought of organic nationalists from the European continent. To be sure, a brittle secessionist like Stephens, with his musty constitutional doctrines, could see nothing sensible in Lincoln's ideas and dismissed them as mystical nationalism. But they were no such thing to any clear-thinking critic.

Modern writers should know better than to take their cues from a sore loser like Stephens. Yet an important point to recall

is that myths are not merely untrue, they are also powerful. They persist. The idea that emancipation was an act of foreign policy is proving to be at least as persistent as Stephens' view of Lincoln as a ruthless nationalist or the imaginary envelope with the Gettysburg Address scrawled on it. It is time for all of them to be erased from the Lincoln literature.

Robert W. Johannsen to Deliver Twelfth R. Gerald McMurtry Lecture on Lincoln and the South

Robert W. Johannsen, the J. G. Randall Distinguished Professor of History at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, will present the twelfth R. Gerald McMurtry Lecture on Thursday, May 25, 1989, at 8:00 p.m. at the Louis A. Warren Lincoln Library and Museum. The title of his lecture is "The People Will Set All Right: Lincoln and the South in 1860."

Professor Johannsen has been active in middle period historiography since the 1950s, and is best known for his *Stephen A. Douglas* (1973) which received the Francis Parkman Prize for Literary Distinction in the Writing of History. Although Douglas was and is a controversial figure, Johannsen's reviewers gave him special praise for his objectivity, with comments like "Johannsen's objective account is much more balanced than any previous interpretation." Richard N. Current, in his review, praised *Stephen A. Douglas* saying,

Johannsen scrupulously refrains from making a case either for or against his subject. . . . The book demonstrates the virtues of large-scale straightforward narrative biography at its best. This is no "life and times" — Douglas himself is always in the foreground, though he is clearly related to the events in which he had a part. Its completeness and objectivity will make it the standard authority for many years to come.



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FIGURE 2. Robert W. Johannsen

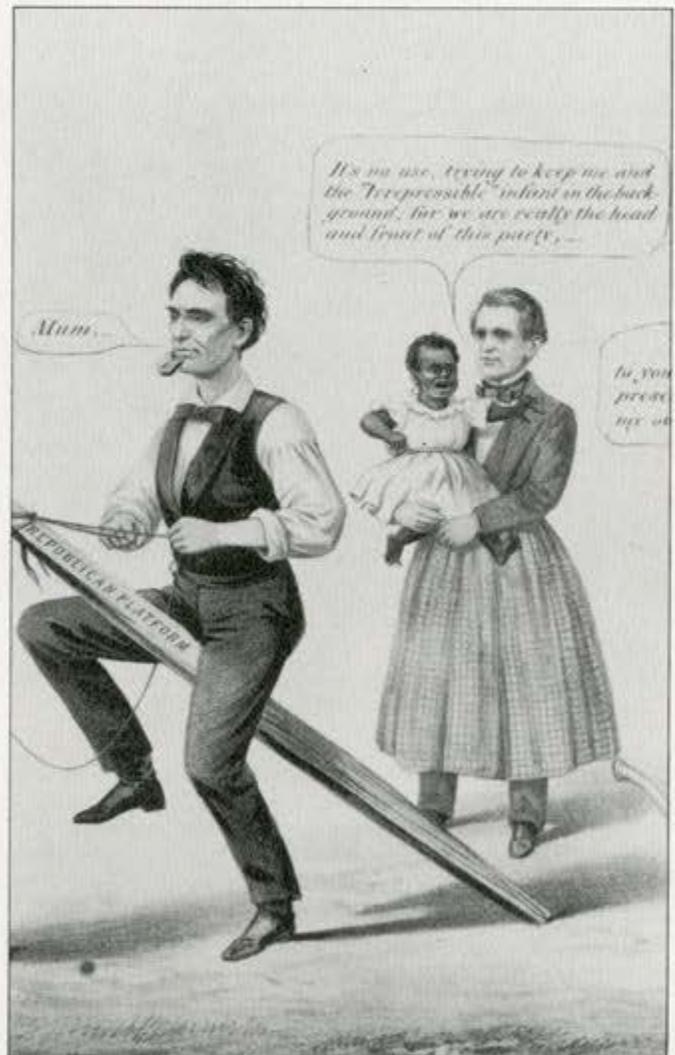
Johannsen has also published books on Douglas and Lincoln; his *The Lincoln-Douglas Debates of 1858* (from the 1860 book based on Lincoln's scrapbook) appeared in 1965, and he also edited (with Harry V. Jaffa) *In the Name of the People: The Speeches and Writings of Lincoln and Douglas in the Ohio Campaign of 1859* (1959). His most recent book, *The Frontier, The Union, and Stephen A. Douglas* (1989) includes four chapters on Lincoln: "In Search of the Real Lincoln, or Lincoln at the Crossroads," "The Lincoln-Douglas Campaign of 1858: Background and Perspective," "Lincoln, Liberty, and Equality," and "Sandburg and Lincoln: The Prairie Years."

Finally, Johannsen has also published two books collateral to Lincolniana, *Frontier Politics and the Sectional Conflict: The Pacific Northwest on the Eve of the Civil War* (1955) and *To the Halls of the Montezumas: The Mexican War in the American Imagination* (1985).

For more information on this year's lecture, call (219) 427-3864.

Some lectures from previous years are still available in pamphlet form. They are sent, free of charge, to any interested party. Please send requests to:

Yvonne White
Louis A. Warren Lincoln Library and Museum
P.O. Box 1110
Fort Wayne, Indiana 46801



From the Louis A. Warren
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FIGURE 3. Political Cartoon, 1860. Southerners were quite hostile to Lincoln's stand on slavery as they understood it. In fact, Lincoln made no public statements on any issue during the campaign, and thus, his lips were sealed on the slavery issue. The more radical William H. Seward (right) insisted that the Southerner's attitude was leading to an "irrepressible conflict."

CUMULATIVE BIBLIOGRAPHY, 1988

by Ruth E. Cook

Selections approved by a Bibliography Committee consisting of the following members: Dr. Kenneth A. Bernard, 50 Chatham Road, Harwich Center, Mass. 02645; Arnold Gates, 168 Weyford Terrace, Garden City, N.Y. 11530; James T. Hickey, Box 55, Elkhart, Illinois 62634; Ralph G. Newman, 175 E. Delaware Place, 5112, Chicago, Illinois 60611; Lloyd Ostendorf, 225 Lookout Drive, Dayton, Ohio 45419; Hon. Fred Schwengel, 200 Maryland Avenue, N.E., Washington, D.C. 20515; Dr. Wayne C. Temple, 1121 S. 4th Street Court, Springfield, Illinois 62703; Frank J. Williams, RFD, Hope Valley Road, Hope Valley, R.I. 02832. New items available for consideration may be sent to the above persons or the Louis A. Warren Lincoln Library and Museum.

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BAKER, JEAN H.

"Not Much Of Me"/Abraham Lincoln/As A Typical/American/Jean H. Baker/Elizabeth Todd Professor of History/Goucher College/Louis A. Warren/Lincoln Library and Museum/Fort Wayne, Indiana/1988/

Pamphlet, paper, 8 7/8" x 6", 22 (3) pp., illus.

BELZ, HERMAN 1988-10

Abraham Lincoln and American/Constitutionalism/Herman Belz/(Caption title)[Reprint from *The Review of Politics*, Spring 1988]

Pamphlet, paper, 8 3/4" x 5 3/4", pp. 169-197. Requests should be sent to *The Review of Politics*, P.O. Box B, Notre Dame, IN 46556.

BORITT, GABOR S., EDITOR 1988-11

The Historian's/Lincoln/Pseudohistory, Psychohistory, and History/(Device)/Gabor S. Boritt/Editor/Norman O. Forness/Associate Editor/University of Illinois Press/Urbana and Chicago/[1988]

Book, cloth, 9 1/4" x 6 1/4", fr., xxviii p., 423 (21) pp., illus.

BRADEN, WALDO W. 1988-12

(Double title page)/Abraham Lincoln Public/Speaker/(Photograph)/Waldo W. Braden/Louisiana State University Press/Baton Rouge and London/[1988]

Book, cloth, 9 1/4" x 6 1/4", viii p., 119 (2) pp., price, \$19.95.

INTERNATIONAL LINCOLN ASSOCIATION 1988-13

International Lincoln Association/Volume 1, Number 3 Quarterly Newsletter January-March, 1988/(Cover title)/

Pamphlet, paper, 11" x 8 1/2", 4 (1) pp., illus. Requests should be sent to International Lincoln Association, P.O. Box B, Idyllwild, CA 92349.

LINCOLN COLLEGE 1988-14

Lincoln/Newsletter/(Device)/Volume VII, Number 7 Lincoln, Illinois Spring, 1988/(Cover title)/

Pamphlet, paper, 11" x 8 1/2", (8) pp., illus.

LINCOLN COLLEGE 1988-15

The same as above, except this is Summer 1988.

LINCOLN COLLOQUIUM, PAPERS FROM 1988-16

Papers From/The Second Annual/Lincoln Colloquium/October 24, 1987/(Photograph)/"To this place, and the kindness of these people, I owe everything."/Lincoln's

1988-9

Farewell Address/to the People of Springfield/February 11, 1861/Co-sponsored by/Lincoln Home National Historic Site/and the/Sangamon County Historical Society/[1988]

Pamphlet, paper, 11" x 8 1/2", 23 (5) pp. Requests should be sent to George L. Painter, Lincoln Home National Historic Site, Springfield, IL 62703-1693.

LINCOLN LEGACY 1988-17

(Device) *The Lincoln Legacy/A Quarterly Publication of The Lincoln Group of Illinois/Volume 2, Number 1 January, 1988/(Cover title)/*

Folder, paper, 11" x 8 1/2", 10 (1) pp., illus. Requests should be sent to The Lincoln Legacy, Illinois Benedictine College, 5700 College Rd., Lisle, IL 60532-0900.

LINCOLN LEGACY 1988-18

The same as above, except this is April, 1988.

Folder, paper, 11" x 8 1/2", 20 (1) pp., illus.

LINCOLN MEMORIAL UNIVERSITY 1988-19

Lincoln/Herald/(Device)/Spring 1988/Vol. 90, No. 1/[Harrogate, Tenn.]

Pamphlet, paper, 10 1/8" x 7 1/8", 36 pp., illus., price per issue, \$5.00.

LLOYD, JOHN A. 1988-20

Lincoln In/Cincinnati/by/John A. Lloyd/(Photograph)/(Cover title)/[1988]

Pamphlet, paper, 9" x 4", 16 pp., illus. Requests should be sent to John A. Lloyd, 420 Oak Road, Glendale, OH 45246.

LOUIS A. WARREN LINCOLN LIBRARY AND MUSEUM 1988-21

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Folder, paper, 11" x 8 1/2", 4 pp., illus. Number 1787, Lincoln Gored by Television;

Number 1788, Death's Jester: John Singleton Mosby; Number 1789, Ella Lonn: Female Scholar and Civil War Historian; Number 1790, Death's Jester: John Singleton Mosby (Conclusion); Number 1791, The Indiana State Debt and Governor Oliver P. Morton; Number 1792, Robert V. Bruce and The Launching of Modern American Science 1846-1876.

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War And The/Constitution/Abraham Lincoln/And/Franklin D. Roosevelt/Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr./Albert Schweitzer Professor of Humanities/The City University of New York/27th Annual/Robert Fortenbaugh Memorial Lecture/Gettysburg College/1988/

Pamphlet, paper, 9" x 6", fr., 31 (6) pp., illus. Requests should be sent to Professor Gabor S. Boritt, Department of History, Gettysburg College, Gettysburg, PA 17325.

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Crowns of/Thorns/and Glory/Mary Todd Lincoln and Varina Howell Davis./The Two First Ladies of the Civil War/Gerry Van der Heuvel/E. P. Dutton (Device) New York/[1988]

Book, cloth spine and hardboard, 9 1/2" x 6 1/2", ix p., 306 (2) pp., illus., price, \$19.95.

