

CONTINUING THE DEBATE: ABRAHAM LINCOLN AND EQUALITY

THESIS

Presented to the Graduate Council of
Texas State University-San Marcos
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements

for the Degree

Master of ARTS

by

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San Marcos, Texas
May 2009

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For Kristina

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

At this time I would like to acknowledge the people that made this possible. First of all I must thank my wife Kristina Bordine for all of her support. Without her, I could not have accomplished this momentous task. Also, I must acknowledge my parents, Stephen and Fretta Jackson. Their help throughout my educational journey has been long lasting, and I could not have made it without their support.

I must also acknowledge my committee of Dr. Kenneth Grasso, Dr. Kenneth Ward, and especially my chair, Dr. Cecilia Castillo. Your help and assistance has been tireless and beyond beneficial. I have learned from the feet of truly brilliant minds, and I will be forever in your debt.

This manuscript was submitted in November of 2008.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: SETTING THE DEBATE

In the scholarly debate over Abraham Lincoln there have been countless “scholars [that] have attempted [to make] clear to us the great President, and still the study, analysis, and synthesis goes on with surprisingly large differences of opinion and interpretation.”¹ One area that seems to draw significant debate is Lincoln’s view of equality. Within this discussion, many scholars see Lincoln as a principled believer in equality because of his adherence to the Declaration of Independence. Conversely, there are scholars who believe that he could not have been a champion of equality since he did not fight for equality in every sense of the word. However, I believe that in this debate, equality can and should be broken down into several subcategories. These subcategories are social, political, human, and racial equality. An accurate identification of the type of equality one wishes to consider will allow for better comprehension of Lincoln’s view on equality. In addition, one must determine which form of equality holds the greatest significance for Lincoln. Failure to define the type of equality leads to confusion and misinterpretation. George M. Fredrickson’s “A Man but Not a Brother: Abraham Lincoln

¹ Edward McMahon, “Lincoln, the Emancipator,” *The Pacific Historical Review* 5 (1936): 7-25, 7.

and Racial Equality,” illustrates this problem. Fredrickson argues that Lincoln recognizes the slaves as men but not as brothers since he denied them political equality because of a belief in racial inequality. In other words, Lincoln was a “white supremacist in his concept of domestic race relations but indulged a principled egalitarianism in his world outlook.”² Fredrickson offers as evidence for his claim that Lincoln’s philosophy was shaped by Henry Clay. He argues in all things dealing with equality and politics, Lincoln followed the Great Compromiser from Kentucky. According to Fredrickson, Lincoln adhered to Clay’s racist feelings and so denied domestic political equality to the slaves. However, I believe that Fredrickson is mistaken in his assessment of Lincoln. Fredrickson conflates the various kinds of equality such that the distinction between human equality and the other types is lost. Lincoln’s rejection of political equality becomes a rejection of equality per se. Therefore, Fredrickson erroneously assigns the rejection of political equality to a belief in racial inequality. However, if one acknowledges not only that Lincoln was influenced by Clay, but also by Thomas Jefferson, Fredrickson’s argument becomes less convincing. Lincoln, it may be argued, is more closely aligned with Jefferson than Clay. Moreover, Lincoln may not merely be a follower of a given view, but may offer us a more expansive understanding of equality in the United States. Lincoln extends the Jeffersonian creed, and in essence creates his own philosophy. I believe that it is because of his strong belief in the Jeffersonian ideal of human equality that Lincoln abhors slavery. This belief, not an allegiance to an ideology of racial inequality guides Lincoln’s views on political equality. Fredrickson also incorrectly explains Lincoln’s interest in public opinion. Fredrickson asserts that Lincoln,

² George M. Fredrickson, “A Man but Not a Brother: Abraham Lincoln and Racial Equality,” *The Journal of Southern History* 41 (1975): 38-59, 52.

as Clay, bends his own thoughts toward the opinion of the day. This alignment to current public opinion is a tenet of Clay's thought. Yet, if one takes Jefferson as Lincoln's role model, one may argue that Lincoln attempts to change and transform the zeitgeist. Thus, I argue that Lincoln whole-heartedly believed in human equality and sought for the abolition of slavery. This belief in human equality also led to Lincoln's emancipation of the slaves followed by colonization as a practical solution. Since he recognized that public opinion was opposed, Lincoln could not grant domestic political equality; however, he could shift and mold the opinion towards eventual acceptance of political equality. Thus, I argue Lincoln was not motivated by racial inequality, but a belief in human equality.

At this point, there is a need to define these categories of equality and how they are connected to the discussion. Political equality includes citizenship and participation in government. Human equality as discussed here is linked to the Declaration of Independence. It is the recognition that the slaves are human and as human beings they possess certain rights. In this debate, racial equality is connected to white supremacy since the slavery experienced in the United States was between two different races. The idea of white supremacy is the belief that anyone who is white is superior to the slaves simply because of their race. In other words, a racist, in this context, is someone who believes that the race they belong to is the race that is the best, and that they should rule other races. Social equality here is in essence the full acceptance of individuals into social relations. An example of a social aspect is the intermarriage of whites and slaves.

Initially, I will demonstrate the character of the debate over Lincoln's view of the equality of the slaves. To this end, I will contrast two interpretations of Lincoln's notion

of equality. Then, I will address Fredrickson's interpretation of Lincoln which will require a consideration of his argument regarding Clay's influence on Lincoln, and his account of Lincoln's understanding of equality. Next, I will offer a counter interpretation which focuses on Thomas Jefferson as Lincoln's mentor. I believe that the thoughts of Thomas Jefferson had a greater impact on Lincoln than Fredrickson is willing to admit. However, since the two role models are similar, I must elucidate the difference between the two proposed influences. I will argue that the primary difference lies in their understanding of the function of public opinion. Once I have established the Jeffersonian lineage of Lincoln, I will be able to refute Fredrickson's claim of racial inequality.

Lincoln is without a doubt one of the most written about figures in American history. Yet within this literature there are numerous debates. One major debate concerns his belief in equality. There are two typical interpretations within this debate: Lincoln as a firm supporter of equality and Lincoln as a racist. A component of this debate centers on who Lincoln's political and philosophic mentor is. Usually, either Thomas Jefferson or Henry Clay is proffered as his role model. In order to better illustrate the dimensions of this debate I will discuss several interpretations of Lincoln.

Harry V. Jaffa in *The Crisis of the House Divided: An Interpretation of the Issues in the Lincoln-Douglas Debates* investigates Lincoln's thoughts on equality and their connection to the Declaration of Independence. Jaffa begins his analysis by discussing the Declaration of Independence and its author. Jaffa claims that "Jefferson... understood the Declaration in its universal sense, and as including the Negro, is beyond doubt or cavil." Jaffa continues, "the Revolution was a great stroke to secure the unalienable rights of *some* men, but, still more, it was a promise that all men everywhere might *some* day

not merely possess but enjoy their natural rights.” Jaffa explains the connection by stating “Lincoln’s interpretation of human equality...is that every man had an equal right to be treated justly, [and] that just treatment is a matter of intrinsic worth that a man’s society ought to be proportioned to the value of his work and not to any subjective liking or disliking.” Jaffa claims that Jefferson and Lincoln both believed “that he who would not be a slave ought not to be a master.” After acknowledging the Jeffersonian influence, Jaffa further explores Lincoln’s thoughts and adds “Lincoln was equally dedicated to the principle of equality and the principle of consent.” The principle of equality that Jaffa is discussing is the human equality that all men possess, and from which the principle of consent is derived. Thus, Jaffa correctly identifies the most important type of equality within Lincoln’s mind as human equality. Moreover, Jaffa also considers Jefferson the force behind Lincoln and his thoughts and actions.³

Joseph R. Fornieri also argues that Lincoln is devoted to human equality. In his work, *Abraham Lincoln’s Political Faith*, Fornieri discusses Lincoln’s political faith, and how it is influenced by what he calls Lincoln’s civil theology. Fornieri defines civil theology as a political religion, or an “all encompassing moral vision of public life affirmed by the regime.” At the heart of Fornieri’s investigation is “to analyze Lincoln’s biblical republicanism as constituted by the mutual and complementary influence of reason and revelation. The term biblical republicanism is my characterization of Lincoln’s civil theology interpretation of American public life.” Fornieri accepts that the source of revelation is Lincoln’s biblical faith, which provides the foundation for his reasoned argument from the Declaration of Independence. Fornieri claims that “Lincoln

³ Harry V. Jaffa, *The Crisis of the House Divided. An Interpretation of the Issues in the Lincoln-Douglas Debates* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), 314, 315, 320, 326, 377.

envisioned the Declaration of Independence as a moral covenant that promulgated the first principles of the nation's faith...in sum, Lincoln interpreted the Declaration of Independence as a declaration of the precepts of natural law." Furthermore, Fornieri asserts that "Lincoln's interpretation of the Declaration of Independence as a charter of liberty that conveyed the general precepts of American republicanism coincided remarkably with Jefferson's." The influence of Jefferson upon Lincoln's thoughts is also apparent to Fornieri, who also agrees that Lincoln places the greatest significance upon human equality.⁴

James M. McPherson also judges Lincoln's position on equality positively. In his article titled "Who Freed the Slaves?" the issue at hand is the idea of self-emancipation. McPherson begins his argument by discussing exactly what the self-emancipation theory consists of. His main point is that while Lincoln hesitated in emancipating the slaves, many of them actually ran towards freedom on their own. This theory claims that the slaves, not Lincoln, are the impetus for the eventual emancipation. However, McPherson argues that this self-emancipation theory is not all together correct. McPherson posits "by challenging the 'myth' that Lincoln freed the slaves, proponents of the self-emancipation thesis are in danger of creating another myth—that he had little to do with it." To clarify his thought, McPherson states "the common denominator in all the steps that opened the door to freedom was the active agency of Lincoln as antislavery political leader, president-elect, president, and commander in chief." Thus, McPherson concludes that Lincoln is owed more credit than the self-emancipation theorists are willing to give him. McPherson believes that these theorists are forgetting the outcome of the war. He argues

⁴ Joseph R. Fornieri, *Abraham Lincoln's Political Faith* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2005), 7, 6, 5, 151.

“no matter how many thousands of slaves came into Union lines, the ultimate fate of the millions who did not, as well as the fate of the institution of slavery itself, depended on the outcome of the war.” Thus, McPherson claims that the reason for Lincoln’s hesitation to emancipate the slaves was to make sure the Border States did not secede. Thus, Lincoln had to make the issue the Union and not slavery; otherwise the Border States may not have joined the North. If that had happened, the North could have lost the battle, and slavery would have won the war. Therefore, the McPherson interpretation is that Lincoln is the answer to the question: who freed the slaves?⁵

Harry S. Blackiston, in “Lincoln’s Emancipation Plan” argues “Lincoln was of the opinion that the salvation of the Union was dependent upon the extension or the restriction of slavery.” Blackiston also demonstrates that Lincoln believed in gradual emancipation and colonization. The main difference between Blackiston’s interpretation and other scholar’s is that Blackiston remembers to add that “Lincoln held that...there was no reason why the Negro was not entitled to all the natural rights embraced by the Declaration of Independence, which are enjoyed by the white man.” Blackiston continues his distinction by claiming that Lincoln “interpreted the standard maxim ‘all men created equal’ as being of no practical use in effecting the separation of the thirteen Colonies from Great Britain, and on the contrary, contended that it was placed in the Declaration of Independence for future use in the attainment of democracy.” Thus, Blackiston holds that while Lincoln had some views that by many standards are racist, Lincoln actually

⁵ James M. McPherson, “Who Freed the Slaves?” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 139 (1995): 1-10, 3, 3, 5.

believed in the moral claim of the Declaration. Blackiston argues that Lincoln ultimately believed in human equality and the Union over anything else.⁶

Within the literature on Lincoln, there are many arguments that connect Lincoln and his belief in human equality to the Declaration of Independence. However, in “Abraham Lincoln and American Constitutionalism,” Herman Belz uses both the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence to help comprehend the 16th president. Belz’s argues “that Lincoln viewed the Declaration of Independence as the nation’s primary constitutive document, and as the source of the substantive principles of the Constitution.” Belz contends that Lincoln believed that “The Declaration created the Union, making liberty, equality and consent the fundamental principles of republican government. The Constitution in turn was written in order to make a more perfect Union that would preserve those principles.” Therefore, in Belz’s interpretation of Lincoln, the Declaration and the Constitution cannot be separated. Belz argues that this idea of togetherness is crucial to fully understanding Lincoln, and his actions. Continuing, Belz offers the idea that “the Constitution, in Lincoln’s view, was not an organic and unwritten thing. It was the document handed down by the Fathers to which, in its forms and substantive principles, popular attachment was to be maintained through constitutionalist conviction.” Yet, according to Belz, Lincoln understood the Constitution as the Declaration of Independence in practice.⁷

⁶ Harry S. Blackiston, “Lincoln’s Emancipation Plan,” *The Journal of Negro History* 7, no. 3 (1922): 257-277, 260, 262, 262.

⁷ Herman Belz, “Abraham Lincoln and American Constitutionalism,” *The Review of Politics* 50, no. 2 (1988): 169-197, 181, 181, 190.

In, “Lincoln, the Constitution, and Democracy,” Andrew C. McLaughlin also uses the Constitution as the foundation of Lincoln’s position. In his argument, McLaughlin points out that “a nation must have a constitution and that a real constitution is more than ink on paper.” Therefore, he claims that Lincoln needed to have control over more than a paper full of ideas. McLaughlin states that “Lincoln as a lawyer and a good citizen, had respect for the principles and prohibitions of the Constitution—he conceived it his duty not to ignore or avoid them—but his dominating impulse was to protect the very nature of the republic.” In order to achieve this goal, Lincoln needed to “rely on the inner sense of right and duty and power without which democracy and popular government are shallow and hypocritical.” McLaughlin continues arguing that Lincoln’s ultimate goal was “to save democracy, to save it from even itself.” In order to save the country from itself, Lincoln pushed for the human equality that the Declaration proclaimed and that the Constitution protected. In the end, McLaughlin understands Lincoln as comprehending the idea that “if democracy fail[s], the failure will be chargeable to ourselves.” Since Lincoln held to the truth of human equality, he interpreted the Declaration, and the Constitution, as he did.⁸

Some scholars parse through Lincoln’s words in order to grasp his thoughts of equality. Most of these interpretations focus on the relationship between Lincoln and his understanding of ‘all created equal’. For example, Mark M. Krug in “Lincoln, the Republican Party, and the Emancipation Proclamation,” examines Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation, and the reduction of its importance in recent years. He posits that “when issued, it was held as an epoch-making, revolutionary document, as a clarion

⁸ Andrew C. McLaughlin, “Lincoln, the Constitution, and Democracy,” *International Journal of Ethics* 47 (1936): 1-24, 4, 4, 6, 24.

call for human freedom; yet as the years went by, historians became, in an increasing measure, disenchanted with it.” Krug suggests that the Emancipation Proclamation must be returned to its initial prominence. Krug also believes that Lincoln’s interpretation of the Declaration of Independence is what gives credence to the proclamation as a moral covenant. While other scholars believe that the proclamation was not a moral stance against slavery because it did not grant political equality for the freed slaves Krug disagrees stating “the fact is that social and political equality for Negroes was not an issue in 1858.” Krug also disagrees with the idea that the proclamation was nothing more than a military document. “In view of his long record of criticizing slavery and his long expressed desire to see it abolished, it seems reasonable to assume that Lincoln...issued the Emancipation Proclamation both to help the military situation of the Union and to right a moral wrong.” In other words, Krug sees the value that Lincoln placed upon human equality. Thus, Krug argues that the Emancipation Proclamation needs to be returned to its initial status as a revered moral covenant, a covenant regarding human equality.⁹

Major L. Wilson, in “The Free Soil Concept of Progress and the Irrepressible Conflict,” parallels the free soil movement and Abraham Lincoln. Wilson defines the free soil movement as “professing only the desire to save the Union made by the fathers, [however] the free-soilers were actually in the process of transforming the Union which the fathers had made.” Wilson’s claim is that this is exactly the path that Lincoln was making, and that in the path “liberty and the Union were inseparable and that the preservation of the one inextricably bound the other.” Wilson does in fact place Lincoln

⁹ Mark M. Krug, “Lincoln, the Republican Party, and the Emancipation Proclamation,” *The History Teacher* 7 (1973): 48-61, 48, 50, 51.

in the free-soil movement, yet he maintains that Lincoln is more in line with the moderate free-soilers. Lincoln fits firmly in this movement as he claimed to be placing the country back on its original foundation. This foundation, as many believed, was the idea of ‘all created equal’. While Wilson claims that Lincoln is a moderate free-soiler, the idea of placing the country back upon the founding philosophy of human equality remains his main argument.¹⁰

While these scholars see Lincoln in a positive light, there are others that disagree with the Great Emancipator interpretation, and seek to remove Lincoln from the sanctified position of the egalitarian president. For the most part, these scholars examine Lincoln and focus on his views on racial equality. Reinhard H. Luthin discusses Lincoln’s political affiliation. In “Abraham Lincoln becomes a Republican,” Luthin shows the transformation of Lincoln from Whig to Republican. He maintains “although he opposed the extension of slavery into the territories, Lincoln was essentially conservative on the slavery issue.” Luthin claims that Lincoln initially desired to leave the slavery issue alone and to not commit to the Republican Party. Luthin maintains that the original reason for Lincoln’s refusal to join the Republicans was their strict abolitionist beliefs. In the end, Lincoln helped lead the Republicans towards a more moderate stance on slavery. Lincoln became a Republican, yet Luthin claims that “throughout his metamorphosis from Whiggery to the new creed he had indicated his extreme reluctance to break old party ties.” Thus, according to Luthin, while Lincoln did in fact become a Republican, he still maintained his more conservative thoughts on racial

¹⁰ Major L. Wilson, “The Free Soil Concept of Progress and the Irrepressible Conflict,” *American Quarterly* 22, no. 4 (1970): 769-790, 773, 775.

equality. In other words, Lincoln, while switching political parties, continued to hold on to the conservative racial equality philosophy of the Whig party.¹¹

Charles H. Wesley's article, "Lincoln's Plan for Colonizing the Emancipated Negroes," discusses Lincoln's own plan for the freed slaves. Wesley declares that "as early as 1852, [Lincoln] gave a clear demonstration of his interest in colonization." However, Wesley argues that the motivating force behind the colonization idea is none other than Henry Clay. Wesley highlights that Lincoln "quot[es] favorably in one of his public utterances ... Henry Clay, [saying]—'There is a moral fitness in the idea of returning to Africa her children, whose ancestors have been torn from her by the ruthless hand of fraud and violence.'" Wesley argues that "although Lincoln believed in the destruction of slavery, he desired the complete separation of the whites and blacks. Throughout his political career Lincoln persisted in believing in the colonization of the Negro."¹² Wesley describes, in detail, some of the actual colonization plans that Lincoln held, and attempted. One example worthy of noting is Lincoln's meeting at the White House with prominent men of African descent. According to accounts of this meeting, Lincoln said

And why...should the people of your race be colonized and where? Why should they leave this country? You and we are different races. We have between us a broader difference than exists between almost any other two races. Whether it is right or wrong I need not discuss, but this physical difference is a great disadvantage to us both, as I think. Your race suffer[s] very greatly, many of them, by living among us, while

¹¹ Reinhard H. Luthin, "Abraham Lincoln becomes a Republican," *Political Science Quarterly* 59, no. 3 (1944): 420-438, 420, 438.

¹² Charles H. Wesley, "Lincoln's Plan for Colonizing the Emancipated Negroes," *The Journal of Negro History* 4 (1919): 7-21, 8.

ours suffer from your presence. In a word we suffer on each side. If this is admitted it affords a reason why we should be separated.¹³

Wesley also presents how Lincoln planned to make this colonization a reality. He says that Lincoln “came to be of the firm opinion that emigration must be voluntary and without expense to those who went.” Thus, Lincoln desired for the government to pay for those emancipated slaves to be colonized. Lincoln “seemed satisfied with two [possibilities for colonies]—one was for the establishment of a colony in the harbor of Chiriqui in the northeastern section of the State of Panama, near the republics of New Granada and Costa Rica.” A similar plan for a colony in the West Indies was attempted, and came to fruition under Lincoln’s guidance, but it failed as soon as the freed slaves landed in Haiti. Wesley concludes that Lincoln is not the great emancipator, but as a man who believed in racial inequality.¹⁴

In “Abraham Lincoln Argues a Pro-Slavery Case,” Anton-Hermann Chroust attempts to illustrate Lincoln’s alleged racism. Chroust rests his position on a small court case that Lincoln argued in 1847. Chroust argues that the slavery issue was neither as intense, nor as paramount to Lincoln in 1847. According to Chroust, Lincoln was offered a case in Coles County Illinois. The case was to argue what many consider to be the pro-slavery side of the case. Chroust points out “undoubtedly, Lincoln was fully appraised of the facts [of the] case before he agreed to argue it.” In fact, Chroust claims that the other party involved in the case “likewise approached Lincoln, asking him to appear [on their] behalf as well that of the Negroes. Lincoln, however, declined to do so.” Therefore,

¹³ Nicolay and Hay, *Complete Works of Abraham Lincoln*, VII, p. 1 quoted in Wesley, 13.

¹⁴ Wesley, “Lincoln’s Plan,” 18-20.

Chroust believes that the slavery issue was not as important to Lincoln at that time. He continues his thought by stating “what could possibly have induced Lincoln, the ‘Great Emancipator’ to lend his professional skills to a slaveholder intent upon retrieving his runaway slave?” Chroust’s answer is that Lincoln “was in the look-out for business, a not uncommon practice in those days. As it happened, [the pro-slavery side] was the first to approach him and to engage his services as co-council.”¹⁵ Thus, Chroust believes that the image of Lincoln as the Great Emancipator is erroneous. Thus Chroust posits that “all this leaves but one conclusion: in 1847, to use the words of Benjamin P. Thomas, one of Lincoln’s outstanding biographers, ‘the slave issue had not yet seared itself into his conscience to the point of inducing him to place the plight of a few hapless Negroes above the abstract legal aspects of the slavery question.’”¹⁶ Thus, it can be seen that Chroust believes that Lincoln was a professional businessman first and foremost. In doing so, Chroust raises some doubts regarding Lincoln’s position on the equality of man.

In his article “Lincoln, the Emancipator,” Edward McMahon also investigates Lincoln and equality. McMahon begins by looking at slavery and how it is connected to equality. He argues that “to fully understand Lincoln’s attitude on the subject of slavery it is necessary to keep in mind that he was born in a border state and, consciously or unconsciously, imbibed somewhat of the slave-holder’s point of view.” This slave-holder’s point of view is attributed to Henry Clay. McMahon states “Lincoln was, moreover, a great admirer and follower of Henry Clay, and there is scarcely an idea of

¹⁵ Anton-Hermann Chroust, “Abraham Lincoln Argues a Pro-Slavery Case,” *The American Journal of Legal History* 5, no. 4 (1961): 299-308, 302, 308.

¹⁶ Benjamin P. Thomas, *Abraham Lincoln, A Biography*, 112 (1952) quoted in Chroust, 308.

Lincoln's on this subject that is not drawn from the views of Clay, although Lincoln often rephrased and improved on Clay's statements." McMahon makes the claim that it was not until 1854 that Lincoln publicly denounced slavery. The reason for this he argues is Lincoln's jump back into politics and not faithfulness to equality. In his discussion, McMahon also acknowledges the influence of Thomas Jefferson, but claims it is exaggerated. Although Lincoln believed in the Declaration of Independence, and the Jeffersonian philosophy, McMahon recounts that "in his own state he did nothing to bring about better conditions for the black man." This is the argument that Fredrickson makes as well. Fredrickson maintains that the reason why Lincoln did nothing to better the condition of the freed slaves is because of his feelings regarding the racial inferiority of the slaves. McMahon agrees with Fredrickson's argument noting that Lincoln believed "because of difference in race, the negroes were denied equal rights in the United States." Thus, McMahon argues that Lincoln fought for emancipation and colonization of the freed slaves only as a follower of Clay. McMahon concludes his argument saying that even though Lincoln is seen as "the Great Emancipator of the black race in the United States...he tried everything possible...to avoid straight-out emancipation." He believes the reason Lincoln tried to avoid emancipation is racism.¹⁷

Clearly, a debate exists within Lincoln scholarship. Many agree on his allegiance to the Declaration of Independence. Nevertheless, there are some who focus on why Lincoln did not take this belief in human equality to the logical next step, and fight for political equality for all. George M. Fredrickson argues that Lincoln did not fight for

¹⁷ McMahon, "Lincoln, the Emancipator," 8, 8, 11, 12, 22, 25.

political equality because he did not believe in political equality. However, I disagree with Fredrickson. I think Lincoln placed great emphasis on human equality as the foundation of political equality, but recognized the power of public opinion which did not at that time support political equality. Whereas Fredrickson believes that Lincoln adapted his position to the racial public feelings, I argue that Lincoln attempted to transform public opinion to make a path towards future political equality. In other words, I believe it is not because of racial inequality that Lincoln pushes for colonization, but because of a great sense of human equality. In addition, I disagree with Fredrickson's attribution of Lincoln's thoughts to Henry Clay. I contend that Lincoln followed Thomas Jefferson, and that Lincoln placed even more emphasis on human equality than Jefferson himself. Fredrickson claims that Lincoln viewed slaves and freed slaves as men because he detested slavery and believed in human equality, and with this I agree. Yet Fredrickson does damage to Lincoln by arguing that he does not accept freed slaves and slaves as brothers because of his racism. Lincoln was not a racist and the motivation behind his emancipation and colonization idea was merely prudential.

CHAPTER II

LINCOLN THROUGH THE EYES OF FREDRICKSON

In “A Man but not a Brother: Abraham Lincoln and Racial Equality” George M. Fredrickson’s position is clearly articulated. Fredrickson claims that Lincoln is, on the one hand helpful to the slave population, and yet concurrently does them harm. In essence, he acknowledges their humanity and he fights for the abolition of slavery, but at the same time he does not consider them brothers because he denies them political equality. Fredrickson attributes this denial to a long held belief in racial inequality. Ultimately, Fredrickson argues it is this deep-seated feeling that leads Lincoln to push for gradual emancipation followed by colonization instead of political equality. In other words, Lincoln was “like some of the founders of the American Colonization Society... [a] white supremacist in his concept of domestic race relations but indulged a principled egalitarianism in his world outlook.”¹ In order to better analyze Fredrickson’s position, we must consider whether Lincoln is a white supremacist in his domestic relations.

First, Fredrickson establishes the lineage of Lincoln’s racial beliefs. He states that Lincoln’s “principles and preferences can perhaps be traced back to Lincoln’s early

¹ George M. Fredrickson, “A Man but Not a Brother: Abraham Lincoln and Racial Equality,” *The Journal of Southern History* 41.1 (1975): 52.

decision to affiliate with the party of Henry Clay.”² So, to understand Lincoln is to understand Clay. For this reason, it is imperative to understand the character of the Great Compromiser from Kentucky.

Henry Clay “was the seventh of nine children born to the Reverend John Clay and his wife, Elizabeth Hudson, on April 12, 1777, three miles from Hanover Court House, Virginia, which was approximately sixteen miles north of Richmond.” As a young boy in Richmond, Clay began the path towards a career in law. In 1791, a few years after the death of his biological father and remarriage of his mother, Clay’s stepfather moved the family to the United States territory in Kentucky. However, Clay remained in the Richmond area to continue his legal education. In 1797 Clay followed his mother and stepfather to the bluegrass state, but Clay also had other motives for moving to Kentucky. According to Robert V. Remini, to “a young man with gambling instincts and excellent legal and oratorical skills, like Henry Clay, the dark and bloody ground of Kentucky with its special economic needs and aspirations and its burgeoning political development proved a superb location to launch a spectacular career.” During this time, Clay “radiated enthusiasm whenever he spoke. He always seemed caught up in the merit of his argument.” Many of his fellow Kentuckians believed that “Clay’s ‘most unique and admirable’ talent was his voice.” His speaking ability and his political aspirations promised political office. Thus, a mere six years after moving to the area Clay was elected to the Kentucky general assembly. In November of 1803, Clay was the representative for Fayette County, and by 1808, he was the speaker of the lower house and considered by most as “the most promising politician of Kentucky—without

² Ibid., 40.

question.” Because of his prominence within the state, many people looked to Clay for guidance and leadership. Remini posits, “It was only natural for men to look to Henry Clay, the ‘Great Pacificator,’ for solutions to grave problems as they arose, such as the emancipation of blacks. And Clay was not averse to speaking his mind openly on the subject.”³ Although he spoke openly on the subject, Clay’s views on slavery and racial equality are not immediately evident. In fact, “the general position of Clay on the subject of Negro servitude has never been very widely understood.” The reason for the murkiness is because “among the radical abolitionists of the North he was looked upon as a friend of slavery for the sake of political advancement and among the slaveholders in some parts of the South he was regarded as almost a member of the Garrisonian group of the enemies of slavery.”⁴ Perhaps these two contrasting interpretations of Clay can be explained by simply acknowledging two facts. Clay himself was a slaveholder, and he also fought to effectively end slavery. Thus, we see the origin of the tension between the Northern and the Southern views about Clay. Another contributing factor to this confusion is that “Clay regularly claimed moral superiority for all the positions he argued.”⁵ Consequently, Clay can be seen as simultaneously claiming moral superiority for the end of slavery and for owning slaves. However, the question remains does Clay believe in racial inequality?

Clarity on Clay may be found with the American Colonization Society. In fact, the “American Colonization Society was founded in December of 1816 in Washington,

³ Robert V. Remini, *Henry Clay. Statesman for the Union* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1991), 3, 8, 17, 21, 35-40, 483.

⁴ Ivan E. McDougale, “Public Opinion Regarding Emancipation and Colonization,” *The Journal of Negro History* 3, no. 3 (1918): 303-328, 313, 313.

⁵ Remini, *Henry Clay*, 229.

D.C., with Henry Clay presiding.” As the title indicates, the society was for colonizing the slaves, and typically these colonies were to be anywhere but in the United States. The most common places for proposed colonies were Africa and Latin America.⁶ While the society desired abolition, their reasons were vastly different from other abolitionists. In other words, “the American Colonization Society contributed mightily to the development of hostile attitudes against the Negro.” Part of this hostile attitude can be attributed to their motivation for colonization. The society “emphasized its conviction that it was its God-ordained duty to aid in the creation of a white America.” Thus, the society, attempted to make the country as white as possible. It is because of this belief that some have labeled the society as a white supremacist society. While Clay did attempt to end slavery, it was because slavery degraded whites, not blacks. In fact, “Clay in 1829 labeled [freed slaves] as ‘the most vicious’ of the entire population and alleged that they ‘contaminated themselves’ and extended ‘their vices all around them.’” Moreover, “Clay went on to explain that the sole purpose of the colonization scheme was to hold the Negro population stable while the white population increased, thus continuously decreasing the percentage of Negroes in the general population.” In other words, “Clay reminded his hearers in 1848 that ‘their home, then, is not here.’”⁷

Clay and the society also considered the prospect of interracial procreation objectionable and another reason why the slaves should be colonized.⁸ These positions

⁶ Bruce Rosen, “Abolition and Colonization, the Years of Conflict: 1829-1834,” *Phylon* 33, no. 2 (1972): 177-192, 177.

⁷ Rayford W. Logan, “Some New Interpretations of the Colonization Movement,” *Phylon* 4, no. 4 (1943): 328-334, 328, 330, 328, 330.

⁸ Rosen, “Abolition and Colonization,” 178-179.

are not those of someone who could be considered a member of the abolitionist Garrison group. Nevertheless, because of his fight to end slavery and to colonize the slaves, some Southerners felt apprehension, and deemed him an abolitionist. Yet as Remini summarizes, “he completely separated himself from the abolitionists on almost every point except his abhorrence of slavery itself.”⁹ It seems that Clay did believe in colonization because of racial inequality. Clay, “sincerely believed that colonization would work and solve the slavery problem... Barring colonization, no other solution seemed feasible to Clay, and the alternative might be bloody conflict.” Therefore, the issue to Clay was how to advance colonization. Clay and the American Colonization Society, are reported to have believed that solving “the slavery problem [could happen] if enough money, say, one million dollars a year could be raised. Earlier he had hoped that the federal government would assign some of its surplus to the states for this purpose.” Clay was opposed to slavery, just as the abolitionists, but for very different reasons. It can be argued that the abolitionists saw slavery as a moral wrong to the slaves, while Clay and the American Colonization Society saw slavery as a moral wrong to the white man. This idea was not limited to just Clay and the Society. As Remini reminds his readers, “the implied and overt racist opinions by Clay in [his] speech...unfortunately reflected the beliefs of most Americans in the nineteenth century.”¹⁰ Clay fought his entire political life to rid the country of the slave population, yet the reasoning behind the cause is clearly racially motivated.

⁹ Remini, *Henry Clay*, 526.

¹⁰ Remini, *Henry Clay*, 483, 508, 508, 619.

Fredrickson's claims regarding Lincoln's racism take their bearing from Clay, thus he examines the historical accounts of Clay. He notes that "Clay began his political career in 1799 as an outspoken advocate of the gradual emancipation in Kentucky."

Fredrickson also makes sure to point out the connection of colonization to emancipation by explaining that Clay was, "a lifelong proponent of African colonization."¹¹

Fredrickson also highlights Clay's connection to the American Colonization Society,

As one of the founders and leading spirits of the American Colonization Society, Clay maintained with others of his persuasion that gradual emancipation was impracticable unless accompanied by colonization. Deportation of freed blacks was deemed necessary because of the allegedly deep-seated and unconquerable prejudices of the whites, prejudices which would lead to race war if freed blacks were put in a position to demand political and social equality. At the root of this popular revulsion to blacks, Clay argued, was a horror at the prospect of intermarriage."¹²

Fredrickson's account aligns with other historical accounts of Clay. In fact he believes that Clay whole-heartedly "defend[ed] colonization and oppose[d] emancipation on the soil because of the power of white prejudice." While Fredrickson demonstrates that Clay is a believer in racial inequality, he contends that his racism is not as drastic as some of the more overt racists of the day. He asserts that since Clay's feelings are "set against the climate of Negrophobia in the mid-nineteenth century [so] they seem relatively benign."¹³

Nevertheless, he demonstrates that Clay felt that "the color, passions, and prejudices

¹¹ Fredrickson, "A Man but Not a Brother," 41, 43.

¹² Ibid., 43.

¹³ Ibid., 43, 42.

would forever prevent the two races from living together in a state of cordial union.”¹⁴

Fredrickson’s argument supports the view that Clay is a man but not a brother, but whether it is a fitting label for Lincoln remains a question.

Fredrickson next turns to Clay’s influence on Lincoln. Fredrickson states “what Clay meant to Lincoln did not become fully apparent until the 1850s when the latter delivered his moving eulogy and then went on to assume self-consciously the mantle of Clay as a moderate opponent of slavery.” Nevertheless, Fredrickson makes the claim that “from the beginning of his career the Clay influence and example powerfully affected Lincoln and shaped his thinking.” However, “what is relevant here, of course, is not the full scope of Clay’s nationalist philosophy as it affected Lincoln but rather the enduring influence of Clay’s perspective on slavery and race.”¹⁵ An influence that leads Fredrickson to state

Time and time again in the 1850s Lincoln would have recourse to Clay in the debate over the extension of slavery in the territories. He quoted Clay, paraphrased him, and at times virtually plagiarized from him, not merely for the practical political purpose of winning recalcitrant Whigs to the Republican cause but because he indeed thought of himself as taking up where Clay had left off.¹⁶

Fredrickson further argues, “In his fundamental attitudes toward slavery and race Lincoln remained, apparently to the end of his career, a Henry Clay-type Whig colonizationist.”

Fredrickson argues that “more accurately perhaps, [Lincoln] was Henry Clay relieved of

¹⁴ Henry Clay’s response to Mr. Mendenhall, Richmond, Indiana, October 1, 1842, Calvin Colton, ed. *The Works of Henry Clay* (10 vols, New York and London, 1904) quotes in Fredrickson, 43.

¹⁵ Fredrickson, “A Man but Not a Brother,” 43.

¹⁶ Ibid.

the burden of slaveholding and a slaveholding constituency, a difference in situation which permitted Lincoln greater freedom in implementing Clay's basic philosophy than the Kentuckian himself had ever enjoyed."¹⁷ Fredrickson sees the ideology of Clay permeating through all that Lincoln said and did.

Fredrickson believes "that a careful reading of Lincoln's public and private utterances over a...period of time can provide an insight into his actual beliefs."¹⁸ Therefore, he delves into Lincoln's speeches to determine his feelings on racial equality. Fredrickson acknowledges, "in the Peoria speech of 1854 Lincoln alluded to emancipation accompanied by colonization as the only practical way of getting rid of slavery, but conceded that the plan's 'sudden execution is impossible.'" Moreover, Fredrickson claims, "Lincoln laid bare the full thrust of his antislavery program by revealing the close connection in his thinking between the restriction of slavery and the promotion of colonization. Southern slaveholders, he implied, would never be induced to emancipate and colonize their slaves unless they were driven by necessity."¹⁹ At this point, Fredrickson further examines the logistics of Lincoln's plan for colonization. Yet, what is truly important to Fredrickson is Lincoln's motivation. As mentioned earlier, Clay's desire for colonization is racially motivated. Thus, we must turn to Fredrickson's argument regarding Lincoln's motivation for colonization.

Fredrickson's argument rests on a point that many have offered in defense of Lincoln and his title of the Great Emancipator. It is Lincoln's acknowledgment of the

¹⁷ Ibid., 43, 43-44.

¹⁸ Ibid., 40.

¹⁹ Ibid., 48-49, 49.

slaves as human beings with mental facilities. Fredrickson states “colonization would not succeed, Lincoln was arguing, unless accompanied by humanitarian interest in the Negro and some respect for his capabilities.” These capabilities are acknowledged to be mental abilities. In addition, these mental abilities are significant enough to allow the slaves to govern themselves. While many use this fact to validate Lincoln’s non-racist views, Fredrickson challenges this idea by claiming “Lincoln was saying in effect that every race had the right and capability of self-government but only on its ‘own soil.’” Furthermore, Fredrickson reasons “the promise of colonization was that it would transplant blacks to regions where they could rule themselves and develop their own democratic institutions free of white interference. This concept of a democratic world of distinct races enjoying perfect self-government on their ‘own soil’ repudiated internationalist racism while affirming the inevitability of domestic racism.” Following this line of thought Fredrickson claims “it [Lincoln’s domestic racism] implied ‘the ideal of racial homogeneity,’ the belief that equality in a given nation or climate zone could exist only for the one racial group which had attained a dominant position because of its superior adaptability to the physical environment.” Fredrickson continues claiming that Lincoln is racist as “it followed that a society guaranteeing equality for all its inhabitants would have to be racially homogeneous. There can be little doubt that Lincoln accepted this basic doctrine.” Finally, Fredrickson declares “Lincoln, like some of the founders of the American Colonization Society, was a pragmatic white supremacist in his concept of domestic race relations but indulged a principled egalitarianism in his world outlook.”²⁰ Thus, Fredrickson connects Lincoln to Clay and the American Colonization Society. This

²⁰ Ibid., 49, 51, 51, 51, 52.

belief in a pure white country is what leads Fredrickson to claim that Lincoln is a white supremacist.

Fredrickson takes his interpretation of Lincoln and his ideas of equality one step further. He connects this idea of racial inequality to political equality. By doing this, Fredrickson seemingly throws a damaging blow to the disputed ‘Great Emancipator’ name positing:

On the surface Lincoln’s racial philosophy seems logically consistent. But deeper probing reveals an unresolved conflict at the root of his thought. The contradiction in Lincoln’s racial ideology came...from his somewhat arbitrary distinction between slavery and white supremacy. Slavery, according to Lincoln, flagrantly contradicted the Declaration of Independence, but the denial to blacks of political and civil equality did not. To make this point Lincoln distinguished between the natural rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, and the full privileges of citizenship...²¹

Fredrickson falls in line with other scholars who believe that Lincoln’s actions speak louder than his cries for “all men created equal.” If Lincoln truly believed in the Jeffersonian position, he would have done more to obtain political equality for the slaves. To summarize the claim, “slavery, according to Lincoln, flagrantly contradicted the Declaration of Independence, but the denial to blacks of political and civil equality did not.”²² Fredrickson offers evidence straight from Lincoln’s mouth to prove his argument. In his famous Peoria address of 1854 Lincoln states “free them, and make them politically and socially, our equals? My own feelings will not admit of this; and if mine

²¹ Ibid., 52.

²² Ibid.

would, we well know that those of the great mass of white people will not. Whether this feeling accords with justice and sound judgment, is not the sole question, if indeed, it is any part of it. A universal feeling, whether well or ill-founded, cannot be safely disregarded.”²³ By offering this quote, Fredrickson believes that he not only proves Lincoln’s denial of political equality, but also affirms his argument that Lincoln bends to the opinion of the day. Thus, Fredrickson asserts Lincoln’s ideas of equality are those of Henry Clay.

In “A Man but not a Brother: Abraham Lincoln and Racial Equality,” George M. Fredrickson offers a common interpretation of Abraham Lincoln. Fredrickson challenges the interpretation of Lincoln as the Great Emancipator. Although he grants that Lincoln believed in the humanity of the slaves, he also believes that his true feelings regarding equality are not noble. Fredrickson argues that Lincoln had deep-seated feelings of racial inequality. These feelings of white superiority are the basis of Lincoln’s push for colonization. Since Lincoln held these racial beliefs he was not willing to grant political equality to the African-American population. Fredrickson believes that if Lincoln truly believed in the moral tenets of the Declaration of Independence he would have fought for political equality. Thus, he believes that Lincoln is not a brother to the slaves. In other words, Fredrickson claims that while Lincoln saw the humanity of the slaves, he nevertheless held on to his Clayian belief of racial inequality.

²³ Roy P. Basler, ed., *Abraham Lincoln: His Speeches and Writings* (New York: The World Publishing Company, 1946), 292.

CHAPTER III

A DIFFERENT TAKE

Within the study of Abraham Lincoln, there exists a debate over Lincoln and his thoughts on equality. George M. Fredrickson has labeled the sixteenth president a man because of his acknowledgement of the humanity of African-Americans. At the same time, Fredrickson argues that Lincoln is not a brother because of his apparent racism, which leads him to not grant political equality to the freed slaves. He believes that if Lincoln truly was the Great Emancipator, he would have pushed for political equality. Fredrickson feels that Lincoln's racial bias informed his political policy and influenced his emancipation and colonization plan. However, I disagree with Fredrickson's analysis of Lincoln. I believe that Fredrickson is only half right in his assessment of Lincoln. He is accurate in his understanding of Lincoln's belief in human equality. However, he incorrectly assigns racism as the ground for not granting political equality to the freed slaves. He also misunderstands Lincoln's thoughts on public opinion. Finally, Fredrickson exaggerates Clay's influence on Lincoln. Without a doubt Clay influenced Lincoln; however, the philosophy of Thomas Jefferson had a greater impact upon Lincoln. Let us turn to an alternative assessment of the Great Emancipator.

Lincoln placed a greater emphasis on human equality than Fredrickson admits and thus he fights for emancipation and colonization. Human equality is the impetus behind the colonization plan, and not a belief in racial inequality as Fredrickson asserts. To grasp Lincoln's position on human equality we must first establish from where his belief springs forth. The source of Lincoln's notion of equality, I contend, is Thomas Jefferson. As such, we must briefly turn our attention to the Jeffersonian philosophy. Although the Jeffersonian influence is clearly evident, I also hold that Lincoln extends Jefferson's idea of human equality further than Jefferson himself did.

The most logical place to start an investigation of Jeffersonian thought would be within the Declaration of Independence. Not only can it be said that "The first important statement of Jefferson's political theory is contained in the Declaration of Independence," but also "Here are eloquently expressed the now familiar doctrines of human equality, of the natural and inalienable rights of man, of the guaranty of these rights as the first cause of government, and the right and duty of revolution when they are subverted."¹ While Lincoln was most certainly familiar with those who influenced Jefferson himself, I am arguing that Jefferson is the strongest influence shaping Lincoln's concepts of equality and government. Jefferson is, "Judging from his famous utterance, 'All men are created equal,' ...generally regarded as the great champion of human equality." While this title is plausible, some consider Jefferson a hypocrite since he owned slaves. Nevertheless, "It should not be forgotten, however, that Jefferson was really opposed to the institution of negro slavery and more than once went on record against it, as in his proposition for a

¹ C.E. Merriam, Jr., "The Political Theory of Jefferson," *Political Science Quarterly* 17.1 (1902): 25.

Virginia constitution and in the report on the ‘Government for the Western Territory.’² However, this charge of hypocrisy is not the primary focus of this brief investigation of Jefferson. What is central to our investigation is Lincoln’s perception Jefferson’s proclamation of equality. Nevertheless, a brief examination into his view on the slavery topic will help the investigation.

One area of contention regarding Jefferson and slavery is the failure of the Declaration of Independence to mention slavery. Many people thus assume that slaves were not included in the equality proposition. In fact, it “is well known, the final draft of the Declaration does not answer this question directly, but in the original draft, Jefferson makes it clear that he considers slaves to be men.” Thus, “In that version [the original draft], he excoriates the King for keeping ‘open a market where MEN should be bought and sold.’” So, it can be argued that Jefferson sees the slaves as humans. The argument continues “If we were to ask what evidence Jefferson offers to prove that blacks are men, we would be missing the point. For once we know that man is, i.e., a rational being with the capacity for moral action, it is self-evident that blacks are men. Any attempt to prove or demonstrate this proposition would negate its self-evident character.”³ Hence, Jefferson’s theory on human equality did include slaves. Thus, the contradiction in making the grand claim of ‘all men created equal,’ and owing slaves is quite apparent. However, we must delve a little deeper into his conception of human equality.

In reference to equality, “Jefferson does not mean here that all men are equal in the possession of a moral sense. Nor does he mean that all men are equal by virtue of the

² Ibid., 30-31.

³ Jean Yarbrough, “Race and the Moral Foundation of the American Republic: Another Look at the Declaration and the Notes on Virginia,” *The Journal of Politics* 53 (1991): 90-105, 95.

scientific or biological ‘fact’ of their creation. On the contrary, equality is a moral principle; by virtue of their membership in the human race, all men possess certain inalienable rights.”⁴ In other words, Jefferson’s understanding of equality in the Declaration is one of human equality. Since the slaves are human, they should have the opportunity to enjoy the inalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Even though Jefferson believed equality did not necessarily extend to a moral sense, he did see slaves as men. Be that as it may, one cannot ignore the fact that at the time of authorship the Declaration did not apply to all white men, let alone black men. Thus, it is important to determine if Jefferson believed the self-evident truths should apply to all who he considered men.

Jefferson felt “self-evident truths are *immediately* and *intuitively* clear to all reasonable people as soon as they understand the meaning of the terms involved.” Obviously, these self-evident terms were human equality and the possession of inalienable rights. Also, “Jefferson, [believed] these truths afford the clearest and most certain knowledge of which the mind is capable, since they are truths that are always and everywhere the same, regardless of history, culture, or majority vote.”⁵ Therefore, it is because of man’s equality that they possess the inalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. According to this interpretation of Jefferson, these self-evident truths were true regardless of circumstances. However, slaves were not guaranteed any form of equality, and certainly not guaranteed their inalienable rights. Despite this fact, Jefferson was “Confident of the ultimate triumph of democratic principles, [yet] he was

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 93.

not eager for their immediate and universal application.” Although, “Jefferson believed fully in democracy and was confident of the ultimate triumph of the system ...he was too keen and careful an observer to think that all people were capable of adopting the American system in his day.” Certainly, this is not “in harmony with his ideas on natural rights; but as he himself said, theory and practice are not always in accord, and ‘the habits of the governed determine in great degree what is practicable.’”⁶ Consequently, it is possible that Jefferson believed in the transcendent nature of his proclamations, and at the same time was not eager for the universal application of them. Jefferson recognized the attitudes of the day were not capable of granting any freedoms to the slaves. As he accepted the feelings of the day, he did not attempt to push for human equality. Perhaps at another time the people would accept the universal application of the ideals of the Declaration. What was of the utmost important to Jefferson was the creation of a new type of government, and if the majority of people involved were not ready for the universal application of ‘all men created equal,’ then so be it. Jefferson believed if the “government had attempted to secure in their fullness the natural rights of all Americans, not to mention all men everywhere, the experiment of such a government would have met disaster before it had been fairly attempted.”⁷ Thus, Jefferson believed if the country attempted to grant any form of equality to the slaves, the government would crumble. In summation, “From the self-evident truth that ‘all men are created equal,’ certain moral principles follow, such as the duty to respect each individual’s inalienable rights, and

⁶ Merriam, “The Political Theory of Thomas Jefferson,” 39, 41.

⁷ Harry V. Jaffa, *The Crisis of the House Divided. An Interpretation of the Issues in the Lincoln-Douglas Debates* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), 315.

others, such as slavery, do not.”⁸ Jefferson’s belief in human equality was firm, but its applicability to people of African ancestry was contingent.

As I have claimed that Lincoln extended Jefferson’s thoughts, let us turn to this idea. Lincoln extends the Jeffersonian creed and in essence creates his own philosophy of human equality. This interpretation emphasizes Jefferson’s influence upon Lincoln’s thinking. In *The Crisis of the House Divided: An Interpretation of the Issues in the Lincoln-Douglas Debates* Harry V. Jaffa explains that the Founders “All...read the Declaration as an expression of the sentiments of Locke’s *Second Treatise of Civil Government*... [and] many of them had read... [Locke], almost from childhood...”⁹ Thus, Locke’s philosophy is considered the philosophy of the Declaration, a philosophy associated with the concept of human equality. In other words, “The idea of the equality of all men, within the eighteenth-century horizon, was connected with the idea of the state of nature, a pre-political state in which there was no government, no lawful subordination of one man to another.” Jaffa continues, “The concept of the state of nature, as a pre-political state, highly undesirable, yet tolerable, is among the axiomatic premises of the doctrine of the Declaration of Independence.”¹⁰ Jaffa explains that while the state of nature theory was unattractive to the Founders, the other option (absolute despotism) was insufferable. Thus, if the Founders, and more importantly Jefferson, believed that the British Government was acting despotically, then they could revolt under the Lockean philosophy. As a result, Jaffa posits that this Lockean understanding

⁸ Yarbrough, “Race and the Moral Foundation of the American Republic,” 93.

⁹ Jaffa, *The Crisis of the House Divided*, 314-315.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 318.

of human equality informed Jefferson's understanding of human equality. This Lockean view of human equality is "although a normative concept, [it] is normative primarily in a negative way: it specifies the conditions under which the right of revolution ought to be exercised, and it specifies the purposes for which it ought to be exercised." The conditions for revolution must be harsh, "although not the worst possible, [and] the purposes for which the right of revolution ought to be exercised are minimal rather than maximal conditions of human welfare." Thus, Jaffa regards the Founders, and Jefferson, as stressing their minimal rights with the Declaration: "What the signers termed absolute despotism... would have appeared as a paradise of freedom to the oppressed humanity of the ages... [and] they claimed they were absolving... their allegiance in the eyes of civilized mankind because of the insecurity which they had come to feel at the hands of the government of Great Britain." The most significant and central idea behind the Declaration was its grant of a right to revolution. In fact, Jaffa believes that Jefferson's claim of the right to revolution is the major function behind the Declaration. Nevertheless, "Jefferson... and all others of [his] general philosophic persuasion understood the Declaration in its universalistic sense, and as including the Negro, is beyond doubt or cavil."¹¹ Even though the revolutionary claim played the largest role in Jefferson's thought, he did believe in the humanity of the slaves.

Now, let us turn to Lincoln's thoughts on human equality and the influence of Jefferson. First of all, in October of 1854, in his illustrious Peoria Address, Abraham Lincoln said in his own words how important Jefferson was to him: "Mr. Jefferson, the author of the Declaration of Independence, and otherwise a chief actor in the revolution;

¹¹ Ibid., 319, 314.

then a delegate in Congress; afterwards twice President; who was, is, and perhaps will continue to be, the most distinguished politician of our history.”¹² So, at the minimum one can see Lincoln’s admiration for Jefferson and his politics. Yet, on further examination one may truly see the influence of Jefferson’s philosophy of human equality upon Lincoln. In 1858, while debating Stephen A. Douglas, “For Lincoln there was, indeed, ‘only one issue,’ but that issue was whether or not the American people should believe that ‘all men are created equal’ in the full extent and true significance of that proposition.”¹³ It must be recalled that for Jefferson, this claim had more to do with the Lockean idea of the state of nature and the right to revolution. However, this Lockean pre-political concept of the state of nature had little bearing on Lincoln’s philosophy. In other words, “To indicate the departure that Lincoln’s interpretation represents we observe that the idea of such a pre-political state plays no significant role in his thinking.”¹⁴ Consequently, Lincoln takes the initial claim of human equality espoused by Jefferson, and carries it a step further.

To help articulate this point, I return to Harry V. Jaffa who explains that “Lincoln’s interpretation of ‘all men created equal’ is *not* that it specifies the condition of man in a pre-political state, a highly undesirable state which marks the point at which men ought to revolt, but that it specifies the optimum condition which the human mind can envisage.” Therefore Jaffa contends that Lincoln downplays the revolutionary charge of Jefferson. Jaffa continues his exploration noting that Lincoln’s interpretation of human

¹² Roy P. Basler, ed., *Abraham Lincoln His Speeches and Writings* (New York: The World Publishing Company, 1946) , 284.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 309.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 318.

equality was “a condition *toward* which men have a *duty* ever to strive, not a condition *from* which they have a *right* to escape. It is conceived as a political, not as a pre-political, condition, a condition in which...[the] equality of right is secured to every man not by the natural law...but by positive human law.”¹⁵ As such, Lincoln transforms Jefferson’s declaration on human equality. While Jefferson used the famous claim in order to separate from the despotic British government, Lincoln uses it to grasp just government. Jaffa sums up this thought,

In the old, predominantly Lockean interpretation of the Declaration civil society is constituted by a movement away from the state of nature, away from the condition in which the equality of all men is actual. But in Lincoln’s subtle reinterpretation civil society (i.e., just civil society) is constituted by the movement *toward* a condition in which the equality of man is actual.¹⁶

Lincoln’s movement toward civil society can be seen as an alteration of the Jeffersonian belief in the state of nature. Nevertheless, both Lincoln and Jefferson end with civil society. Thus one can see that the Jefferson/Locke movement is away from the state of nature, and Lincoln’s is a movement toward an ideal government. Jaffa explains further:

In the older view, which Lincoln shared as far as it went, the actual recognition of the equality of all men is really a necessary condition of the legitimacy of the claims of the government upon the governed. But it is also a sufficient condition. For the language of the Declaration at least permits the view that, if the government of King George III had not been as thoroughly despotic as it pretended it actually was, the Revolution might not have been justified. In short, the Declaration conceives of just government mainly in terms of the relief from oppression. Lincoln

¹⁵ Ibid., 320.

¹⁶ Ibid., 321.

conceives of just government far more in terms of the requirement to achieve justice in the positive sense; indeed, according to Lincoln, the proposition ‘all men created equal’ is so lofty a demand that the striving for justice must be an ever-present requirement of the human and political condition. While Lincoln most assuredly accepted the Declaration in its minimal, revolutionary meaning, he gave it a new dimension when he insisted that it provide a test not merely of legitimate government—i.e., of government that *may* command our allegiance because it is not despotic—but of *good and just* government—i.e., of a government which may be loved and revered because it augments ‘the happiness and value of life to all people of all colors everywhere.’¹⁷

Thus, Jaffa claims that Lincoln takes Jefferson’s thoughts a step further. While Lincoln down plays the revolutionary purpose of Jefferson, he extends the equality claim to fit his philosophical understanding of human equality. Lincoln converts Jefferson’s creed into “a transcendental affirmation of what [government] *ought* to be.”¹⁸ Jaffa asserts that “Jefferson’s horizon, with its grounding in Locke, saw all commands to respect the rights of others as fundamentally hypothetical imperatives: *if* you do not wish to be a slave, then refrain from being a master.” And, “Lincoln agreed, but he also said in substance: he who wills freedom for himself must simultaneously will freedom for others.” Finally, Jaffa believes “Lincoln’s imperative was not only hypothetical; it was categorical as well. Because all men by nature have an equal right to justice, all men have an equal duty to do justice, wholly irrespective of calculations as to self-interest.”¹⁹ Thus, one can see that Lincoln believed in Jefferson’s claim of human equality, and extended his declaration of

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., 327.

human equality to a greater scale. In other words, “Lincoln treats the proposition that ‘all men are created equal’ as a transcendental goal and not as the immanent and effective basis of actual political right. And, in so doing, he transforms and transcends the original meaning of that proposition, although he does not destroy it.”²⁰

Jaffa explains that Lincoln extends the Jeffersonian philosophy because he “was trying to perpetuate a government, Jefferson in 1776 to overthrow one, and Lincoln clearly has exaggerated Jefferson’s non-revolutionary purpose.” Jaffa continues, “In fact, the equality proposition was indispensable to Jefferson in building his case for the right of revolution upon Lockean ground, but the state-of nature idea with which it was bound up was alien to Lincoln’s whole way of thinking.”²¹ While this idea is alien to Lincoln, he nonetheless extends the equality declaration made famous by Jefferson.

According to Jaffa, Lincoln transformed Jefferson’s words, beliefs, and morality to mean something more. In fact he states, “It is true that Lincoln’s hypothesis as to the meaning of the Declaration is consistent with the language of that document and is at least superficially consistent with its known philosophic antecedent.”²² While Lincoln did not fully interpret the Declaration in the Lockean sense, he did understand it for what it could be. Lincoln saw the Declaration as a political statement through which government could achieve actual human equality. Instead of a mere claim for revolution, Lincoln saw the Declaration as Jefferson’s lasting influence upon human equality. While Jaffa makes the argument that Lincoln shifts Jefferson’s philosophy, he does acknowledge that

²⁰ Ibid., 318.

²¹ Ibid., 322.

²² Ibid., 317.

Jefferson did see some larger application than what was allowed in 1776. In fact, Jaffa claims “Lincoln was probably right when he said that Jefferson did intend to make a statement which would have future as well as present usefulness, although he may have overstated the degree to which such a thought dominated in Jefferson’s consciousness.” Nevertheless, it is possible to see the Jeffersonian influence upon Lincoln, and at the same time acknowledge Lincoln’s transformation. Jaffa believes “There is a difference between the use which Jefferson might have intended and the one Lincoln ascribes to him. Jefferson was always more concerned to remind the people of their rights than of their duties. He emphasized what they should demand of their government rather than what they must demand of themselves.”²³ Consequently, Lincoln has transformed the Jeffersonian concept of human equality. Lincoln feels that the people should be aware of their duty towards human equality. In recognizing this fact, Lincoln has made human equality the basis of all equality.

Thus, it is this increased sense of Jefferson’s human equality that led Lincoln to push for emancipation and colonization. Fredrickson’s claim of Lincoln’s adherence to Clay’s philosophy fails to give due consideration to Jefferson’s influence on Lincoln’s understanding of human equality. While Clay quickly “reminded his hearers in 1848 that ‘their home, then, is not here,’”²⁴ Lincoln believes that they have the capability to join in the process of governing. In the 1854 Peoria address Lincoln said

I have quoted so much at this time merely to show that according to our ancient faith [the Declaration of Independence], the powers of governments are derived

²³ Ibid., 322.

²⁴ Rayford W. Logan, “Some New Interpretations of the Colonization Movement,” *Phylon* 4, no. 4 (1943): 328-334, 328, 330, 328, 330.

from the consent of the governed. Now the relation of masters and slaves is, PRO TANTO, a total violation of this principle. The master not only governs the slave without consent; but he governs him by a set of rules altogether different from those which he prescribes for himself. Allow ALL the governed an equal voice in the government, and that, and that only is self government.²⁵

Lincoln truly believed in human equality, and it is this belief that led Lincoln to push for emancipation and colonization. Just as Jefferson recognized that the universal application of the Declaration was not possible, I argue that Lincoln recognized that political equality was not yet possible. Since political equality was not possible in the United States, Lincoln's second best plan was to allow the slaves a chance to govern themselves elsewhere.

²⁵ Roy P. Basler, ed., *Abraham Lincoln: His Speeches and Writings* (New York: The World Publishing Company, 1946), 304.

CHAPTER IV

A CLOSER LOOK

In “A Man but Not a Brother: Abraham Lincoln and Racial Equality,” George M. Fredrickson believes Lincoln’s “principles and preferences can perhaps be traced back to Lincoln’s early decision to affiliate with the party of Henry Clay.” After demonstrating Clay’s racism, Fredrickson argues that Lincoln pushed for emancipation and colonization because of racial prejudices. He argues that “Slavery, according to Lincoln, flagrantly contradicted the Declaration of Independence, but the denial to blacks of political and civil equality did not.”¹ These denials, based in racial bigotry, are what allow Fredrickson to state that Lincoln is a friend, and at the same time not a brother, to the slaves of the nineteenth century. However, I argue that Fredrickson is only partly correct. He is correct in stating that Lincoln was a believer in the Declaration’s claim of human equality; however, I believe it is this belief that guides his political policy of emancipation and colonization. In addition to this idea, I also hold that Lincoln derived his principles and preferences from Thomas Jefferson’s philosophy. Yet, many similarities exist between

¹ George M. Fredrickson, “A Man but Not a Brother: Abraham Lincoln and Racial Equality,” *The Journal of Southern History* 41 (1975): 38-59, 40, 52.

Clay and Jefferson. So, let us consider whether they in fact differ in their understanding of the slaves. Jefferson and Clay both supported the colonization of the slaves. While Clay's thoughts on colonization are known to many, others are surprised to find out that "Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on Virginia*, circulated in 1784, included a plan for the colonization of emancipated slaves in some faraway place as a step toward the abolition of slavery within the state."² Also, both men were slave holders. Nevertheless, there is a very important difference between them, and this difference is what helps establish Jefferson as the mentor of Lincoln. The difference between these two political heavy weights is how they view the purpose and function of public opinion.

Fredrickson states that Clay had a "conservative doctrine that a statesman must adjust himself to 'the deep-seated and unconquerable prejudices of the people.'" Therefore, according to Clay, the politician had a duty to respect and follow the majority. Thus, no matter how Clay personally felt, he must have changed his convictions to align with the majority. It is one thing to modify a political stump speech to match a population's biases, but to change one's principles is something altogether different. Fredrickson acknowledges Clay's ideological transformation and adds that as he had "political ambitions...he was subject to pressures that forced him at times to compromise his principles."³ Obviously there are times when a politician must compromise, but one should not compromise principles. Nevertheless, Clay felt it was necessary for a statesman to align his principles with the majority regardless of their legitimacy.

² Eli Seifman, "Education or Emigration: The Schism Within the African Colonization Movement, 1865-1875," *History of Education Quarterly* 7 (1967): 36-57, 37.

³ Fredrickson, "A Man but not a Brother," 48, 41.

Therefore, according to Clay, the public opinion of the day should guide the politician, and consequently, the government as well.

On the other hand, Thomas Jefferson does not bend principle for the majority. Jefferson considered it more important that public opinion be accurate. In fact, “if a government rests upon public opinion... then our first and foremost care is to see that this opinion is kept right.” Jefferson felt that an “opinion that is unenlightened and unsound would be the death of a free government.”⁴ Clearly Jefferson’s assessment of the role of public opinion is different from Clay’s. With this distinction in mind let us return to Fredrickson’s argument.

Fredrickson claims, “Lincoln echoed Clay’s conservative doctrine that a statesman must adjust himself to ‘the deep-seated and unconquerable prejudices of the people.’”⁵ Hence, it follows that Lincoln attempted to emancipate and colonize the slaves because of a belief in racial inequality. Recall that “The implied and overt racist opinions by Clay in [his] speech... unfortunately reflected the beliefs of most Americans in the nineteenth century.”⁶ Therefore, Fredrickson argues Lincoln is not a brother to the slaves because of his Clayian adherence to racial inequality. However, if one finds Jefferson’s influence on Lincoln greater, then one may conclude that Lincoln attempted to make sure that public opinion was correct. Public opinion was opposed to political and social equality for the slaves. Since Lincoln recognized the inaccuracy of this opinion, he had to

⁴ C.E. Merriam, Jr., “The Political Theory of Jefferson,” *Political Science Quarterly* 17.1 (1902): 24-45, 35.

⁵ Fredrickson, “A Man but Not a Brother,” 48.

⁶ Robert V. Remini, *Henry Clay. Statesman for the Union* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1991), 619.

do what he could to correct it. Therefore, he emphasized human equality. Fredrickson claims that if Lincoln had truly believed in the tenets of the Declaration of Independence he would have pushed for political equality. However, Lincoln realized the masses were not ready to accept political equality, and thus he had to opt for an achievable goal. This goal was emancipation followed by colonization.

Fredrickson believes Lincoln “justified his reluctance to recommend immediate emancipation to the people of the South by pointing to what he believed was the... impossibility of elevating the freed blacks to a position of equality.”⁷ He quotes Lincoln to prove his racism: “Free them, and make them politically and socially, our equals? My own feelings will not admit of this; and if mine would, we well know that those of the great mass of white people will not. Whether this feeling accords with justice and sound judgment, is not the sole question, if indeed, it is any part of it. A universal feeling, whether well or ill-founded, cannot be safely disregarded.”⁸ Fredrickson contends that Lincoln further demonstrates his domestic racism when he “concluded with the following, ‘Allow ALL the governed an equal voice in the government, and that, and that only is self government.’ Realizing perhaps that he had just obliterated any clear distinction between natural and political rights, he quickly added that he was not of course ‘contending for the establishment of political and social equality between the whites and blacks.’” In his analysis, Fredrickson believes “Lincoln, in other words, conceded here that denial of black citizenship was inconsistent with his basic political

⁷ Fredrickson, “A Man but Not a Brother,” 48.

⁸ Roy P. Basler, ed., *Abraham Lincoln: His Speeches and Writings* (New York: The World Publishing Company, 1946), 292.

doctrines.”⁹ Therefore, Fredrickson concludes Lincoln was a racist because he was not willing to give the freed slaves political, and or, social equality.

Fredrickson drives home his argument by quoting from the 1858 debates between Lincoln and Stephen A. Douglas, “In his reply to Douglas at Ottawa he concedes that there was ‘a physical difference between the two [races], which in my judgment will probably forever forbid their living together upon the footing of perfect equality...’ This question of innate biological differences between the races is the classic statement often used to demonstrate Lincoln’s dyed-in-the-wool racism.” Continuing on, Fredrickson lays a final blow

Lincoln concluded this section of his speech by saying: ‘I agree with Judge Douglas he is not my equal in many respects—certainly not in color, perhaps not in moral or intellectual endowment. But in the right to eat the bread, without the leave of anybody else, which his own hand earns, *he is my equal and the equal of Judge Douglas, and the equal of every living man.*’ Here Lincoln distinguished between an elemental human equality affirmed by the Declaration of Independence and denied by slavery and a full social and political equality that might legitimately be withheld on racial grounds”¹⁰

At this point, Fredrickson freely acknowledges the distinction between human equality and racial equality. Fredrickson’s distinction leads me to conclude that Fredrickson is partially correct. He admits that Lincoln values human equality; however, he fails to acknowledge the importance of Lincoln’s assertion of human equality. Fredrickson

⁹ Fredrickson, “A Man but Not a Brother,” 53.

¹⁰ Ibid., 46.

succinctly states “Lincoln never really believed in the principles of the Declaration of Independence and ... he never espoused them further than suited his own personal and party purposes.”¹¹ Fredrickson interestingly rejects his own distinction or at least denies it any significance.

In order to address Fredrickson, I must address the fact that “it is indubitably true that, from the first raising of the slavery-extension issue ...but never more emphatically than in the joint debates, Lincoln pronounced himself against any measure to bring about the political or social equality of the white and black races.” Harry V. Jaffa asserts that Lincoln’s “consistency, if not his sincerity, has been widely questioned. And the view had been spread that Lincoln adhered to the universalism of the Declaration so long as, but only so long as, it kept pace with the interests of the Republican party and with his interests as a Republican leader.”¹² According to this view, Lincoln’s adherence to the Declaration can be seen as an adherence to politics, and or personal political power. If he had wholeheartedly believed in the truths of the Declaration he would have done more. In other words, “the same argument which condemned slavery should have compelled Lincoln to condemn the political inequality which he tolerated.”¹³ These allegations against Lincoln must be addressed directly.

Harry Jaffa believes that these arguments against Lincoln can be separated into two distinct but related charges. These charges are that Lincoln was guilty of trimming his speeches and being inconsistent. The trimming charge is exactly as it sounds, Lincoln

¹¹ Harry V. Jaffa, *The Crisis of the House Divided: An Interpretation of the Issues in the Lincoln-Douglas Debates* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), 363.

¹² Ibid., 363, 363. 363.

¹³ Ibid., 364.

said one thing in the North, and then said another in the South. The inconsistency claim is analogous to the Fredrickson charge of domestic racism. These charges are nothing new to the debate over Lincoln, and in fact, they originate with none other than Stephen A. Douglas. Initially, Jaffa turns to the lesser of the two connected charges, the trimming of Lincoln's speeches.

One of the main examples offered for the trimming charge is a comparison of Lincoln's Chicago speech in which he states "Let us discard all this quibbling about...this race and that race and the other race being inferior...Let us discard all these things, and unite as one people throughout this land, until we shall once more stand up and declare that all men are created equal," and his Charleston speech given in which he claims, "that I am not, nor ever have been, in favor of bringing about in any way the social and political equality of the white and black races: that I am not, nor ever have been, in favor of making voters or jurors of negroes, nor qualifying them to hold office, nor to intermarry with white people."¹⁴ Jaffa again looks to Lincoln's own words to shed some light on the trimming accusation:

When the Judge says...that I make speeches of one sort for the people of the northern end of the state, and of a different sort for the southern people, he assumes that I do not understand that my speeches will be put in print and read North and South. I knew all the while that the speeches I made at Chicago and the one made at Jonesboro and the one at Charleston, would all be put in print and all the reading and intelligent men in the community would see them and know all about my opinions.¹⁵

¹⁴ Abraham Lincoln quoted in *The Crisis of the House Divided* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), 365.

¹⁵ Ibid.

In examining all three statements, one can see some of the confusion that has been created by Stephen Douglas and other scholars. In the three examples given, it appears that trimming and inconsistency are rampant. On the other hand, Jaffa offers a simple explanation, "It is easy to see in all this the behavior of a professional politician looking for votes."¹⁶ Thus, it is apparent that Lincoln is perhaps a bit guilty of trimming towards his audience, yet according to Jaffa that is not really an issue. He maintains, "that we would be surprised if anyone could find any political speeches in which the speaker did not make some adaptations to the known prejudices of his audience. And we are certain that this was true of both Lincoln and Douglas." Therefore, to the charge of trimming, Jaffa firmly believes that politics is the culprit, and that it is not a real issue. Nevertheless, Jaffa continues, "Although the trimming charge cannot stand on its own feet, it has in all likelihood been believed by many because they have accepted the truth of the inconsistency charge, and this is a most serious matter."¹⁷ The inconsistency charge that Jaffa is referring to here is shared by Fredrickson and warrants investigation.

The inconsistency charge rests on the idea that if Lincoln really believed in the universal truths and applications of the Declaration of Independence, he would have done more for the freed slaves. If he believed that all are created equal, then Lincoln should have pushed for citizenship and more freedoms for the slave population. According to Fredrickson, the reason why this was not attempted is because of his racist leanings; however, Jaffa disputes the idea. Jaffa begins by looking at the exact same passage that

¹⁶ Jaffa, *The Crisis of the House Divided*, 365.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 368, 368.

Fredrickson does. While Fredrickson stressed the feelings of physical inequality in the Ottawa debate, Jaffa stresses other harmful words added at the Charleston debate. Jaffa states, “This passage [from Ottawa] is repeated with minor differences in wording, at Charleston, where Lincoln had also said,... ‘I am not, nor ever have been,’ in favor of making voters or jurors of Negroes or otherwise permitting them social and political equality.”¹⁸ It now appears that Fredrickson, and his interpretation of Lincoln’s belief in racial inequality, could be accurate. However, Jaffa further reflects upon Lincoln’s words, and offers another explanation of Lincoln.

Jaffa launches his counter argument noting that “In the Ottawa debate Lincoln said he did not believe the two races could live together upon a footing of ‘perfect equality.’” Jaffa continues, “but he did not say they could not live together upon a footing of much greater equality.” In addition, Jaffa affirms, “What are we to infer from the foregoing concerning Lincoln’s views? In the first place, we must note that Lincoln, in saying, ‘I am not, nor ever have been,’ says nothing about the future. Lincoln never said, as far as we know, that he never *would* be in favor of such equality.”¹⁹ In other words, Lincoln did not say that he would always be against such an idea.

This debate centers on a section of the Peoria address. Fredrickson believes this section exhibits how Lincoln compromised his beliefs to fit the common opinion of racial inequality. However, Jaffa delivers a counter interpretation. Lincoln states, “What next? Free them, and make them politically and socially, our equals? My own feelings will not admit of this; and if mine would, we well know that those of the great mass of white

¹⁸ Ibid., 383.

¹⁹ Ibid., 386, 383.

people will not.”²⁰ Jaffa stresses that “In the Peoria speech he said his own feelings were against it, but he immediately introduced, as a hypothetical possibility, that his own feelings might not be against it. Why? The sentence, taken as a whole, is an equivocation.”²¹ Whereas Fredrickson sees this quote as Lincoln bending towards racist public opinion, Jaffa believes that it is the exact opposite. Lincoln points out that even if he was for this idea, the great body of people would be against it. Again, this has the appearance of politics at work. Lincoln must stay in line with the great masses, or else he cannot win any elections. In other words, “He made this denial because Douglas was pressing hard to identify Lincoln with a racial egalitarianism that he knew was anathema to public opinion in Illinois in 1858.”²² At this point, it appears that Fredrickson was so eager to make Lincoln fit his racism interpretation that he forgot his own words.

Fredrickson says that “A basic problem confronting any student of Lincoln’s thought and attitudes is how to distinguish the deeply held convictions of the man from the evasion and equivocation of the politician responding to public opinion.”²³ Jaffa contends that one of the main statements used to demonstrate Lincoln’s racism is such an equivocation.

To completely refute Fredrickson, one must address Lincoln’s adherence to the Jeffersonian view of public opinion. Jaffa explains, “‘our government,’ Lincoln said before the Dred Scott decision, ‘rests in public opinion. Whoever can change public opinion, can change the government, practically just so much.’” Therefore, shaping

²⁰ Roy P. Basler, ed., *Abraham Lincoln*, 292.

²¹ Jaffa, *The Crisis of the House Divided*, 383.

²² Harry V. Jaffa, *A New Birth of Freedom: Abraham Lincoln and the Coming of the Civil War* (Oxford, UK: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2004), 227.

²³ Fredrickson, “A Man but Not a Brother,” 40.

public opinion is an important function of statesmanship according to Lincoln. Jaffa shows, in even more detail, that Lincoln connects the idea of public opinion to human equality, “‘Public opinion, on any subject,’ said Lincoln, ‘always has a ‘central idea’ from which all its minor thoughts radiate.’ And the ‘central idea’ in our political public opinion, at the beginning was, and until recently has continued to be ‘the equality of men.’” Again, Jaffa highlights Lincoln’s assessment for “Lincoln, ‘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.’”²⁴ Thus, it is apparent that Lincoln did believe in the power of public opinion but did not require the statesman to accept it, and in fact stressed the statesman’s responsibility to shape it. The shaping of public opinion in turn requires conscious recognition and prudential adjustment to the political prejudices of the audience. Such adjustments may lead to verbal inconsistency, another of the charges laid at Lincoln’s feet.

Jaffa argues that “mere verbal consistency is no criterion of genuine consistency in politics. In fact, genuine verbal *inconsistency* may be a requirement of true political consistency.” Jaffa continues, “fidelity to a cause, rather than to a stock formula of words, is what we have a right to demand of a statesman. Different words may advocate the same cause in different circumstances, and sometimes words of contrary bearing must be used at the same time to advance that cause in given circumstances.” In other words, “a

²⁴ Jaffa, *The Crisis of the House Divided*, 309-310

statesman has only a limited control of the conditions within which he must act.”²⁵ The limited conditions within which Lincoln acted explain his equivocation. What is important to note here is that Lincoln, while appearing inconsistent, or even racist, was actually consistent in his belief in human equality. Lincoln was committed to the idea of ‘all men created equal,’ but as he said, “my own feelings will not admit of this; and if mine would, we well know that those of the great mass of white people will not.”²⁶ Lincoln knew that the conditions of the day would not allow for political equality, and so he could not attempt to push this idea forward. If he had, he would not have been able to correct the opinion of the day. Nevertheless, he could advance the Jeffersonian idea of ‘all men created equal.’ Thus, it is possible to refute the inconsistency charge by recounting Lincoln’s view of public opinion and the Jeffersonian influence. Such as the argument returns to the founding: “the men who secured our independence and founded the government, said Lincoln, certainly believed that all men had certain unalienable rights. But if they had attempted to secure *all* the rights of *all* men they would have ended in *no* rights secured for *any* men.” Clearly, “Lincoln understood the task of statesmanship as we have described it: to know what is good or right, to know how much of that good is attainable, and to act to secure that much good but not to abandon the attainable good by grasping for more.”²⁷ Thus, if Lincoln had grasped for more, for political equality, he would not have achieved even human equality. As a result, Lincoln had to make a prudential decision to return public opinion to a belief in human equality. In other words,

²⁵ Ibid., 369.

²⁶ Roy P. Basler, ed., *Abraham Lincoln*, 292.

²⁷ Ibid., 370.

“Lincoln’s policy was not only to concentrate upon the possible but to proceed a step at a time.”²⁸ Eventually, “when Lincoln began to prepare his plan for reconstruction, toward the end of the Civil War, political rights for *qualified* Negroes was included as a matter of course. This policy was perfectly consistent with what he had said in 1858 and earlier.” Finally, “Lincoln never attempted to propose what was more than one step ahead of the great body of political public opinion. But he always led the way.”²⁹ Thus, he emphasized human equality, and this human equality led to his policy of emancipation and colonization.

Henry Clay and Thomas Jefferson have distinct views of public opinion. Henry Clay thought politicians should acknowledge the public and then shape their philosophy accordingly. Conversely, Thomas Jefferson believed that since free government rested on certain truths and since government was run by public opinion, the politician’s main duty was to make sure this opinion was right. Whereas Clay’s philosophy requires politicians to adapt their principles to public opinion, Jefferson’s philosophy allows for a politician to transform and change opinion. Lincoln clearly was influenced more by Jefferson and his philosophy, and this influence explains Lincoln’s emphasis on human equality. Jefferson’s influence clarifies Lincoln’s attempts to change public opinions. At the time, public opinion did not allow for political equality, but by asserting human equality, Lincoln laid the foundation for a future advancement. Therefore, I contend that Lincoln’s emphasis on human equality motivated Lincoln to establish a policy of colonization, and not feelings of racial inequality. It is true that Lincoln made some comments that lead

²⁸ Ibid., 371.

²⁹ Ibid., 386, 386.

many to argue that he is a racist. Nevertheless, it is possible that Lincoln made these statements as equivocations to appease the known zeitgeist. Abraham Lincoln's political policy of emancipation and colonization was a prudential decision designed to shift public opinion towards eventually accepting racial equality.

CHAPTER V

WHAT DOES IT ALL MEAN?

Abraham Lincoln has been the subject of many investigations. Perhaps it is the copious amount of scrutinization that has led to the numerous divergent understandings. Regardless, there exists within the literature a heated debate on Lincoln and equality. There are those scholars that interpret Lincoln as adhering to equality, and others that believe he was something less than the Great Emancipator. Nevertheless, equality is a broad and abstract concept that must be defined before accurate analysis may be undertaken. Equality can be divided into social, political, human, and racial equality. Therefore, when investigating Lincoln, scholars need to clearly define which form of equality they are examining. Also, scholars must assess Lincoln's estimation of each form of equality. In "A Man but Not a Brother: Abraham Lincoln and Racial Equality," George M. Fredrickson narrows his interpretation to Lincoln and racial equality. His main conclusion is that Lincoln is a "white supremacist in his concept of domestic race relations."¹ I argue that Fredrickson fails to give due weight to human equality, the basis

¹ George M. Fredrickson, "A Man but Not a Brother: Abraham Lincoln and Racial Equality," *The Journal of Southern History* 41.1 (1975): 52.

of all the other noted forms of equality. While he does acknowledge Lincoln's belief in human equality, he downplays its significance and interprets all of Lincoln's speeches, actions, and policies in light of racial inequality. Thus, Fredrickson concludes that the impetus behind the policy of emancipation and colonization is racist. However, if one gives due consideration to Lincoln's commitment to human equality, colonization becomes a means to secure the end of political equality. By recognizing the slaves' humanity, Lincoln was able to grant international political equality. On this point, Fredrickson and I agree; yet he sees Lincoln's denial of political equality as white supremacy. Fredrickson uses Lincoln's own words as support of his position, "free them, and make them politically and socially, our equals? My own feelings will not admit of this; and if mine would, we well know that those of the great mass of white people will not."² However, his conclusion can be readily challenged. Fredrickson himself notes that politicians must make equivocations. Thus, one must look beyond political stump speeches to ascertain Lincoln's views on racial equality. Lincoln realized that he could not openly admit a belief in racial or political equality for slaves and win the presidency. Thus, he had to hide his feelings and attempt to shape the zeitgeist towards these forms of equality. He attempted only to secure the human equality that the Declaration of Independence claimed, following in the footsteps of Thomas Jefferson, not Henry Clay. While he was influenced by Jefferson, he nonetheless expanded human equality to better fit his own understanding of human equality.

² Roy P. Basler, ed., *Abraham Lincoln. His Speeches and Writings* (New York: The World Publishing Company, 1946), 292.

Thus, I reject Fredrickson's claim that Lincoln is not a brother. In fact, Lincoln laid the foundational ground work for political equality for all. If one understands Lincoln's belief in human equality and his understanding of the public opinion of the day, then one can answer these claims of racism. Lincoln may be inconsistent in that he did not attempt to grant slaves political equality within the borders of the United States, but he was not inconsistent in his belief in human equality. As Lincoln himself said, the great masses of people were against the idea of granting political and civil equality. Thus, he knew the slaves had to go somewhere where they would be able to enjoy all the freedoms they possessed as men. Lincoln's policy of colonization was a prudential decision to secure short term freedom and long term equality. While Clay's desire to colonize may be associated with his belief in racial inequality, Lincoln's was not. He

Knew that the opinion of the average white man was unfavorable to the Negro just because there was no example of a free indigenous Negro polity to which Negroes might point as an example of their political capacity. As long as opinions depended on such evidence, and as long as such evidence was lacking, so long would 'perfect equality' between the races be utopian.³

Lincoln's equality principle "meant that [equality] should guide legislators in any existing society, teaching them to produce equal security for the rights of all the governed to as great a degree as conditions would permit."⁴ Unfortunately, the conditions would not permit equality to all, but would permit equality to slaves elsewhere, and that would have to do. Thus, Fredrickson understands Lincoln's universal application of equality

³ Harry V. Jaffa, *The Crisis of the House Divided: An Interpretation of the Issues in Lincoln-Douglas Debates* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), 386.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 375.

when he says that Lincoln is a friend; but he misunderstands Lincoln's domestic policy of equality. The domestic policy of Lincoln's was to push public opinion to believe in equality. Lincoln believed that if this policy could be achieved, then some day it would be possible to live together on equal footing. The final rebuff of the charge of racism is connected to the Emancipation Proclamation. Lincoln's

Unwillingness to retract [the emancipation proclamation] in order to gain public standing in the election testifies to his moral integrity as a leader. If Lincoln were truly a racist, the unscrupulous and cunning politician characterized by his critic, then he surely would have revoked the proclamation rather than risk losing the election. Once the war had progressed and circumstances made it legally and politically possible, Lincoln was inflexible in his prudent determination to rid the Union of the blight of slavery.⁵

Lincoln truly believed in equality and the Declaration of Independence. In fact, it is his wholehearted belief in the Declaration of Independence that leads Fredrickson to label him a racist.

The debate over Lincoln and equality with undoubtedly continue as well as the varying interpretations. Yet, the debate on Lincoln's view of human equality may be advanced by carefully distinguishing human equality, political equality, social equality, and racial equality.

⁵ Joseph R. Fornieri, *Abraham Lincoln's Political Faith* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2005), 166.

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