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COLLECTIVE MEMORY AND HISTORY: How Abraham Lincoln Became a Symbol of Racial Equality

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Abraham Lincoln's changing relation to the African American community of memory is a means of addressing unresolved problems in the work of Maurice Halbwachs. Many sociologists, beginning with Halbwachs, have recognized that commemorative symbolism creates new images of the past, but the process by which this occurs has never been closely studied. I draw on a variety of sources, including Lincoln Day observances, press commentary, oratory, cartoons, and prints, in my effort to understand how commemorative symbolism works. During the past century, no new information about Lincoln's racial attitudes has appeared; yet commemorative pairing and coupling mechanisms and their resulting commemorative networks have transformed him from a conservative symbol of the status quo during the Jim Crow era into the personification of racial justice and equality during the New Deal and the civil rights movement. Since the symbolic devices employed to depict Lincoln are shaped by the very historical record they transcend, however, Halbwachs's distinction between fact-based history and symbol-based commemoration must be modified.

At the dedication of the Lincoln Memorial on May 31, 1922, Union Army veterans, dressed in their blue uniforms, stood beside gray-clad Confederate Army veterans. President Warren Harding noted in his address that Abraham Lincoln would have been thrilled to know that "the states of the Southland joined sincerely in honoring him." Chief Justice and former President William Howard Taft, the second speaker, emphasized Harding's point. The Lincoln Memorial, Taft said, marks the final restoration of "brotherly love" between North and South (*New York Age*, June 10, 1922, p. 2). Nothing was said about brotherly love between blacks and whites. The U.S. Congress, with the full support of its southern members, built the Lincoln Memorial to celebrate regional, not racial, reconciliation.

The dedication organizing committee, however, had invited Dr. Robert R. Moton, president of Tuskegee Institute, to speak on behalf of Lincoln's African American beneficiaries. Moton's remarks added nothing to the program's unity. After President Harding went out of his way to assert that "the supreme chapter in American history is [union,] not emancipation" (*New York Age*, June 10, 1922, p. 1), Moton (1922) observed: "The claim of greatness for

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Abraham Lincoln lies in this, that amid doubt and distrust . . . he put his trust in God and spoke the word that gave freedom to a race." Justice Taft had read Moton's previous draft and deleted its strongest points, but the final version was still forceful. As Moton returned to his seat, it was clear that contrasting conceptions of Lincoln's motives, policies, and achievements had been represented at the dedication of his memorial.

Did Lincoln emancipate the slaves for the sole purpose of destroying the South's labor force and saving the union, or did he intend all along to make them full citizens? The importance of this question became clear to me as I researched Abraham Lincoln in the African American mind, 1865 to present. The question is crucial not because it bears on Lincoln but because its answer throws light on unresolved problems in the theory of collective memory.

COLLECTIVE MEMORY AND HISTORY

Two ways of knowing the past—collective memory and history—are distinguishable. History, according to Maurice Halbwachs ([1950] 1980, pp. 80-81), is "situated external to and above groups" and develops independently of their problems and concerns. Once established, history remains stable—its stream of facts and demarcations "fixed once and for all." History is objectively conceived, sustained by evidence, and unaffected by the social context in which its practitioners work. In contrast, collective memory, the way ordinary people conceive the past, reflects the concerns of the present. Collective memories vanish, Halbwachs explains, when they cease to be relevant to current experience. (For commentary, see Coser 1992, pp. 1-34.)

Only in modern societies does history challenge collective memory. In traditional societies, there is no history. The early Christians, to take an example from Halbwachs's *Legendary Topography of the Gospels in the Holy Land* ([1941] 1992, p. 222), had no conception of "historical preoccupations such as we think of them. . . . Their memories were tied to rites of commemoration and adoration, to ceremonies, feasts, and processions." Since collective memory is the "repository of tradition," history must start "when tradition ends and the social memory is fading or breaking up" ([1950] 1980, p. 78; see also Plumb 1970; Yerushalmi 1982).

Pierre Nora shares Halbwachs's belief in "the ultimate opposition between collective memory and history" (Halbwachs [1950] 1980, pp. 78, 83), but Nora makes one qualification. Interrogative history deconstructs the sacred past; the *lieux de memoire* (sites of memory) reconstruct it. Not all these sites, as Nora's volumes (1984-1992) show, are geographical. Sacred sites are lieux de memoire, but so are the flag and anthem, monument and shrine, sanctuary and ruin, statue and bust, portrait and history painting, coin and medallion, holiday and ritual. "Literature, film, and popular visual imagery in such popular media as postcards, cartoons, and posters"—these, too, are important lieux de memoire (Sherman 1994, p. 186).

Nora brings into view two paths leading to two different notions of the past. History disenchant the past; commemoration and its sites sanctify it. History makes the past an object of analysis; commemoration makes it an object of commitment. History is a system of "referential symbols" representing known facts about past events and their sequence; commemoration is a system of "condensation symbols" (Sapir 1930, pp. 492-493) expressing the moral sentiments these events inspire. History, like science, investigates the world by producing models of its permanence and change. Commemoration, like ideology, promotes commitment to the world by producing symbols of its values and aspirations (Durkheim [1890] 1973; Geertz 1973, pp. 193-233).

The contrast between history and commemoration is not entirely clear-cut. History always reflects the ideals and sentiments that commemoration expresses; commemoration is always rooted in historical knowledge. Commemoration is intellectually compelling, therefore, when it symbolizes values whose past existence history documents; history is morally compelling when it documents events that can be credibly commemorated. Large bodies of social science literature affirm this relationship; yet the framework that would clarify it theoretically does not exist. Consequently, we recognize the reality of collective memory without knowing how it affects our conceptions of the past.

Collective memory, as I conceive it, is a representation of the past embodied in *both* commemorative symbolism and historical evidence. My present concern is to move beyond an analysis of how commemoration differs from history, showing instead what commemoration adds to history. I seek this creative function not in the negative light of commemoration's embellishing the historical record but in the positive light of its articulating, independently of that record, images of the past that never existed before. That commemorative symbols can affect our imagination of the past is not a new idea. We know they do so continually, not only on holidays but everyday—every time commemorative symbols are invoked, visited, or appear in some public context. But we do not know how it happens. Commemoration is said to reflect, correspond to, and emanate from the distinctive experiences of different eras (e.g., Peterson 1960; 1994; Connelly 1977; Kammen 1978; Pelikan 1985), but, as soon as one asks precisely how reflection, correspondence, and emanation actually work, the discussion loses force. Analyses of commemoration go from conceptions of eras and generations to the contents of memory without showing empirically how that connection is made.

My analysis of this problem begins by recognizing commemoration as an entity in itself—a system of interlocking symbols to which people turn to comprehend the world. I show how commemorative symbols make sense of the world's structures and activities by "keying" them to selected events of the past (Goffman 1974, pp. 40-82; Schwartz 1996a). However, every new commemorative symbol "enters a field already occupied. If it is to gain attention, it must do so by displacing others or by entering into a conversation with others" (Schudson 1989, p. 166). Thus, the *lieux de memoire* and *reseaux de memoire* (networks of memory) must be analyzed simultaneously.

My model is not one of changing images of Abraham Lincoln "determining," "reflecting," or "corresponding" to the changing realities of American race relations or of being joined to these realities by some kind of "intervening" variable. Instead, my model focuses on African Americans talking of, reading about, and visualizing Lincoln in the process of engaging a difficult world. Collective memory and social actions appear as constituents, not causes and effects, of one another. Halbwachs's and Nora's distinction is, in turn, enfolded into a semi-otic theory that centers on the formative power of commemorative symbolism and explains how the past is conceived and transmitted apart from the factual record. To explicate and appraise this theory is the purpose of my article.

Methodology

My analysis is based on a variety of materials, including slave narratives, oratory, prints, photographs, public opinion surveys, biographies, and textbooks. I rely most heavily on the Lincoln's birthday issues of three black newspapers: the liberal *Chicago Defender*, the moderate *New York Age*, and the conservative *Atlanta Daily World*.

The function of any holiday is to concentrate people's thoughts on their common beliefs, traditions, and ancestors (Durkheim [1915] 1965, p. 420). I therefore inspected the February 9-15 (Lincoln's birthday) issues of the *Age* for every year from 1880 (when it began publishing) to 1925 and every fifth year afterward until 1945 (when it ceased publishing). I examined all February issues from 1950 to 1960. My coverage of the *Defender* included every fifth Lincoln's birthday issue from its founding year, 1905, to 1955 and every annual issue from 1960 to 1990. I sampled the *Atlanta Daily World* every five years from 1930 (two years after its founding) to 1980 and every year thereafter. I supplemented the *Age*, *Defender*, and *Daily World* with other newspapers, including the *Queen's Voice*, *Amsterdam News*, *Elevator*, *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, and *Chicago Broadax*, along with selected popular periodicals, including February issues of *Ebony* and *Jet*.

Any account of collective memory drawn from such materials must be contestable. No one can be certain what most African Americans at any given time believed and felt about Abraham Lincoln. One can only study the impressions of Lincoln that a small number of people wrote down for others to read and drew or painted for others to see. Yet portrayals of Lincoln reflected the public taste. Some writers and artists shared that taste; some exploited it, dealing mainly with features of Lincoln's life that would interest a mass audience. Others believed their efforts would be of no significance if they did not somehow affect as well as represent the public conception of Lincoln. Thus, changing portrayals of Lincoln in newspapers, magazines, prints, posters, and statues reflect changes in the way he was generally conceived.

My analysis seeks to distinguish new images of Lincoln attributable to commemorative symbolism from those attributable to new facts. The analysis proceeds in five steps. First, I indicate what Lincoln said publicly about the proper relation between the races and what he tried to do politically to bring this relation about. I attend exclusively to Lincoln's public statements and actions because my concern is to understand what people believed his racial views to be, not what they actually were. Second, I show successive generations of African Americans referring to Lincoln's statements and actions as they question his motives for emancipation. Since answers to these questions were based on a stable body of facts, the first stages of my study automatically control for the effects of historical information. Stable information about Lincoln's racial attitudes cannot explain abrupt changes in the way he has been commemorated or how these commemorations have shaped his historical identity.

The last sections show Lincoln's commemoration altering as African Americans come to terms with the changing structures of power and value that organize American society. Part three shows his personifying the "separate but equal" principle of race relations during the first three decades of the twentieth century. The fourth part shows him transformed into a champion of racial justice within a Depression-era society of weakening but still formidable racial barriers. Part five shows Lincoln transformed into a symbol of racial equality during the civil rights movement of the late twentieth century. Drawing on what I have learned from Lincoln's case, I conclude by proposing a revised conception of commemoration, history, and collective memory.

What Lincoln Said

In the middle decades of the nineteenth century, few whites felt more sympathy for the plight of blacks or treated them more decently and respectfully than Abraham Lincoln. Few white politicians were more willing than Lincoln to aid and protect black interests. But this does not say much by today's standards, and while the racist culture in which Lincoln was

reared can be discounted by standardizing his attitudes against the prevailing mode, interpreters have always disagreed on what Lincoln's attitudes were.

Lincoln's political speeches were on the whole unfriendly to blacks, as were the audiences to whom he spoke. Debating Stephen Douglas during the 1858 Illinois senatorial campaign, Lincoln's greatest fear was that his opposition to slavery's extension might be mistaken for a radical view favoring racial equality. He explained:

I will say then 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 of qualifying them to hold office, nor to intermarry with white people; and I will say in addition to this that there is a physical difference between the white and black races which I believe will for ever forbid the two races living together on terms of social and political equality. And in as much as they cannot so live, while they do remain together there must be the position of superior and inferior, and I as much as any other man am in favor of having the superior position assigned to the white race. (Lincoln 1953-1955, 3:145-146)

Lincoln's antislavery supporters did not believe that he made this statement in order to win their votes. He had made many similar statements in the past and had supported policies consistent with them. In 1858, the year he debated Douglas, a black abolitionist named H. Ford Douglass asked Lincoln to sign a petition asserting the right of blacks to testify in court. Lincoln refused (Zilversmit 1971, pp. 65-67). On June 26, 1857, Lincoln referred to white attitudes toward racial "amalgamation" (intermarriage) as one of "natural [as opposed to culturally learned] disgust" (Lincoln 1953-1955, 2:405). Three months earlier, he had objected to the Supreme Court's Dred Scott decision, which had denied the states power to grant citizenship to blacks. But he was arguing in principle, not substance: "If the State of Illinois had that power, I would be opposed to the exercise of it" (3:179). Three years earlier, in 1854, he contemplated a society in which whites and blacks were socially equal. "My own feelings," he said, "would never admit this" (2:256). In 1840, he attacked presidential candidate Martin Van Buren for voting in New York to extend the right of suffrage to free blacks (1:210).

Lincoln considered slavery a moral wrong and worked for its abolition. He opposed slavery's extension with equal fervor, but on this matter his view (like that of most Republicans [Durden 1965, pp. 364-365]) seemed to be shaped by economic as well as moral concerns. He wished to protect midwestern farmers and free laborers from southern planter and slave labor competition.¹ If slavery crosses its present borders, he said, black workers will be everywhere, "as every white laborer will have occasion to regret when he is elbowed from his plow or his anvil by slave niggers" (Lincoln 1953-1955, 3:78).

During the Civil War, the prospect of millions of liberated slaves entering northern states alarmed their inhabitants. This is why Lincoln ordered his military commanders to return escaped slaves to their owners during the first year of the war, why he delayed making emancipation a war goal, why, after announcing the Emancipation Proclamation in September 1862, he went out of his way to stress its military necessity, and why he favored colonization—a policy of gradual emancipation followed by compensation for slaveowners and deportation of the "captive people to their long-lost father-land" (2:256).

Time and again, Lincoln publicly avowed his commitment to colonization. He did not intend to deport blacks against their will, he said, but worked hard nonetheless to realize his

plan. When Congress abolished slavery in the District of Columbia in April 1862, he declared: "I am gratified that the two principles of compensation and colonization are both recognized and practically applied in the act." Shortly afterward, he appointed a commissioner of emigration (for detail and context, see Sinkler 1971, pp. 44-53). For the next two years, Lincoln tried to colonize newly liberated slaves but failed in every instance. After a disastrous 1863-1864 experiment in Haiti, he gave up. But Congress, according to Benjamin Quarles (1962, p. 193), "took no chances on Lincoln's recovery from the colonization bug" and froze the unexpended colonization funds.

Lincoln may have suspected all along that his scheme was utterly impractical (Zilversmit 1971, pp. 120-121), but this never prevented him from publicly asserting his belief in colonization as the ideal solution to the race problem. That many northerners supported Lincoln's antislavery position because they believed he opposed making blacks full members of society is suggested by the 1860 New York City election results: 32,000 people voted for Lincoln, but only 1,600 voted for the black suffrage amendment on the same ballot (Litwack 1961, p. 271).

At the start of his second presidential term, Lincoln recommended (in a personal letter) that certain classes of black citizens of Louisiana be allowed to vote. Many admirers, taking this gesture and others like it as evidence,² assume that Lincoln's friendly statements reflected his true sentiments while his earlier black-baiting arose from political necessity. Many others, friends and enemies alike, assume that Lincoln's call for separation and colonization reflected his true feelings, while his public recognition of black rights and interests was induced by irresistible pressures from within his own party—forces that grew stronger as military victory approached (Sinkler 1971).

Why were Lincoln's racial attitudes so important to begin with? Was not his accomplishment—emancipation—enough? As far as Lincoln's public identity is concerned, the answer is no. Public identity, Harold Garfinkel observed, rests on intention, not achievement. Public identity refers "not to what a person may have done, . . . but to what the group holds to be the ultimate grounds or reasons for his performance" (1956, p. 420). No one can be certain about Lincoln's real goal for writing the Emancipation Proclamation, but everyone can be certain that Lincoln's white supporters accepted his avowed intention. They believed "Honest Abe" when he said he had no wish to see blacks as full citizens. Blacks believed him, too. This is why the "ultimate grounds" or "reasons" for Lincoln's emancipation policy have plagued them over the years.

Historical Dilemmas

If the historical record provides abundant evidence that Lincoln favored racial equality, then to commemorate him as such would ratify what is already known. But if the historical record shows Lincoln to be opposed to racial equality, then commemorative symbols depicting him as its champion would have to be viewed in a formative light—determinants, not reflections, of what is known about him. I cannot provide an exhaustive history of Lincoln's image in the black community's memory, but I can show that his professed opposition to racial equality has been an enduring point of public discussion and that the substance of the point never changed significantly. To establish this claim is essential to my argument about commemoration's autonomy and formative significance.

Between 1865 and 1900, scores of Lincoln biographies appeared. Some of the best-known works, like Josiah Holland's (1866) and Isaac Arnold's (1866; 1885), depicted Lincoln as a demigod; others, notably Ward Hill Lamon's (1872) and William Herndon's (1889), depicted

him as an intelligent but slightly crude product of the frontier. In John G. Nicolay and John Hay's (1890) ten-volume biography, Lincoln appears a wise and effective president. Ida Tarbell (1896; 1900) produced the best-selling books, showing how Lincoln's impoverished frontier days built his character and prepared him for the presidency. Not one of these books hinted, let alone asserted, that Lincoln was inclined toward a multiracial society. And there was no counterhistory, nothing by either a white or African American author asserting that Lincoln's intentions extended to the abolition of racial caste. What, then, were black communities to make of their emancipator?

Lincoln's memory, in the words of one commentator, "will be held in adoration, but one degree inferior to that which we bestow on the Saviour of all mankind" (*Elevator*, Apr. 21, 1865). However, the unpleasant side of Lincoln's record, even among liberated slaves (if there is even slight truth in the 1937 slave narratives)³ would not disappear. In one narrative, Lincoln appears in a drunken stupor and enacts emancipation by mistake. Another story explains that the crack in the Liberty Bell was caused by white people ringing it too vigorously after learning that Lincoln hated blacks as much as they (Wiggins 1987, p. 72). A third story tells of Lincoln going around the country "a-preachin' about us being his black brothers. . . . I sure heard him, but I didn't pay him no mind" (Rawick 1977, pt. 3, ser. 1, 8:562).⁴

As African Americans celebrated their emancipation through the late nineteenth century, many continued to ask why Lincoln had proclaimed it. Frederick Douglass answered their question. Stepping to the speaker's podium on April 18, 1879, to dedicate Thomas Ball's emancipation statue (showing Lincoln with arm outstretched above the head of a kneeling slave), Douglass honored Lincoln's "exalted character" and "great works" but only after jarring his audience by candidly portraying Lincoln's conception of black rights:

It must be admitted—truth compels me to admit—even here in the presence of the monument we have erected to his memory, that Abraham Lincoln was not, in the fullest sense of the word, either our man or our model. In his interests, in his associations, in his habits of thought and in his prejudices, he was a white man.

He was preeminently the white man's President, entirely devoted to the welfare of white men. He was ready and willing at any time during the first years of his administration to deny, postpone, and sacrifice the rights of humanity in the colored people in order to promote the welfare of the white people of this country. . . . To protect, defend and perpetuate slavery in the states where it existed Abraham Lincoln was not less ready than any other President to draw the sword of the nation. He was ready to execute all the supposed constitutional guarantees of the United States Constitution in favor of the slave system anywhere inside the slave states. He was willing to pursue, recapture, and send back the fugitive slave to his master, and to suppress a slave rising for liberty, though the guilty master were already in arms against the Government. The race to which we belong were [*sic*] not the special objects of his consideration. (*New York Times*, Apr. 22, 1876, p. 1)

Douglass explained that Lincoln's attitude toward African Americans was the very key to his success against slavery. If he had professed affection for blacks and made slavery his main issue, Lincoln would have failed. Slavery could only be abolished as a war measure designed to save the union for whites. Lincoln's greatness inhered not in his love for the slave, said Douglass, but in his hatred of slavery and in his decision to include its destruction among his war aims.

Douglass's speech was reprinted in every important newspaper. Years later, segregationists looking for ways to legitimate the Jim Crow system produced a Lincoln portrait remarkably similar to Douglass's. The Maryland Governor Edwin Warfield said in his 1907 Lincoln Day address: "It was not the elevation of the Negro to a social or political equality with the white man that Lincoln advocated." The *New York Age* editor replied by affirming African American belief in Lincoln's limited racial agenda: "Social equality is not the thing; equality under the laws is the thing" (Feb. 21, 1907, p. 1). The *New York Amsterdam News*, on a later matter, was unwilling even to take this much for granted. As Lincoln's heart "beat for the South as well as the North," the *News's* editor explained, one must wonder whether he would have approved the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments (giving blacks citizenship and the ballot) over southern opposition. "With all love for Abraham Lincoln, we ponder upon the destiny which took him off so suddenly" (Feb. 12, 1926, p. 6). Given Lincoln's popularity among Jim Crow ideologues (Pickett 1909), the editor is acknowledging Lincoln's emancipation of the slaves but also wondering whether John Wilkes Booth did them and their posterity a favor. George Washington Williams, Archibald H. Grimke, and W. E. B. DuBois, having thought about the same question, believed it necessary, at long last, to "demythcize" the emancipator (Peterson 1994, p. 174).

The black press's uncertainty about Lincoln must not be exaggerated. Most of its articles praised him for ending slavery and described him as America's greatest president. Most readers probably agreed. Yet questions about his motives remained and the answers always involved compromise: "He may not have had it in mind to make [African Americans] his spiritual children, but he did so make them" through emancipation (*New York Age*, Feb. 13, 1913, p. 4). Invocation of unintended consequences was not the best that could be said for Lincoln, but it seemed for many the most credible.

By the end of the 1920s, two contradictory images of Lincoln had crystallized. These portrayals did not necessarily translate into ambivalence at the individual level: many people simply embraced one portrayal and ignored the other. The two views of Lincoln existed as collective representations. "The one," according to the *Atlanta Daily World*, "shows the Immortal Illinoisan opposed to slavery from an early age and promising to strike a body blow at the inhuman custom should the opportunity ever be his, while the other paints Abe as a friend of slavery and signing the Emancipation Proclamation only as a last resort to keep Negro bondsmen from helping the Confederacy espouse its cause" (Feb. 12, 1932, p. 8).

The first image, Lincoln as slavery's enemy, carried far more weight than the second image of Lincoln as reluctant emancipator. However, this first image must be understood in an early, not late, twentieth-century light. Most black editors, commentators, and spokesmen respected Lincoln, but many doubted that his opposition to slavery was based on a desire to make America a racially integrated society. Thus, Carter G. Woodson measured Lincoln against Elijah Lovejoy, John Brown, Charles Sumner, and Thaddeus Stevens and concluded that Lincoln is "overrated as the savior of the race. At best Lincoln was a gradual emancipationist and colonizationist. . . .He doubted that the two races could dwell together in peace" (*New York Amsterdam News*, Feb. 8, 1936, p. 8). As pressures leading to the civil rights movement increased during the 1940s and 1950s, it seemed more evident than ever that Lincoln was pulled along by more progressive men. Thaddeus Stevens, in particular, "made Lincoln's mantle of 'the great Emancipator' and put it upon his shoulders" (*New York Age*, Feb. 12, 1944, p. 6). In 1950, another *Age* commentator underscored Lincoln's support for

states rights and colonization by revealing a letter in which Lincoln boasts of being tended hand and foot by his host's slave (Feb. 11, 1950, p. 4).

The historian-journalist Lerone Bennett has articulated the case against Lincoln more effectively than anyone. His 1968 *Ebony* article, "Was Abe Lincoln a White Supremacist?," reveals that Lincoln was always an opportunist. He spoke both for and against slavery throughout the 1830s and 1840s. Only as war crippled slavery did he decide on emancipation, making a virtue out of a necessity. Bennett was also impressed by Lincoln's fondness for the word "nigger." If this "man of the people" changed during the war, he didn't change much; "he was the very essence of the white supremacist with good intentions," the embodiment of the American racist tradition (1968, pp. 36-37). In black newspapers everywhere, Bennett's article provoked comment. Editors and commentators congratulated him for his careful research and sadly endorsed his conclusions. The *Chicago Defender* noted sorrowfully that "the Negro and a large body of the American people have been deceived" about Lincoln. Belief in "'Father Abraham' as a labor sympathizer with his compassion for the suffering of black slaves is being wiped out" (Feb. 12, 1968, p. 13; for more anti-Lincoln commentary, see Harding 1981; Lester 1968; Gregory 1971).

COMMEMORATIONS

From the early slave stories through Bennett's critical article to Louis Farrakhan's disparagement of Lincoln on the occasion of the "Million Man March" (*Washington Post*, Oct. 17, 1995, p. A19), the grounds for criticism—Lincoln's conservative racial attitudes and practical motives for emancipation—remain the same. The facts about him were, in Halbwachs's words, "external and situated above groups" and unchangeable. The commemorated Lincoln, on the other hand, was "internal and situated within groups." New images of Lincoln, independently of the facts, mapped different aspects of African American experience.

Abraham Lincoln and Jim Crow

The African American experience has moved back and forth between assertiveness and accommodation. When white society has been in a reform mood, August Meier (1966) observed, black spokespeople have demanded full rights and total integration. When white society has been in a racist mood, black spokespeople have urged solidarity and self-help. From the end of Reconstruction to the Great Depression—a profoundly racist era—African American society was accommodative and insular. Blacks were excluded from every aspect of national life, and their leaders believed they should replicate the system they could not join by establishing their own businesses and training schools and employing and serving members of their own race.

No single leader articulated this enclave ideology more clearly or persuasively than Booker T. Washington. Throughout his public life, Washington conciliated whites, secured their support in the building of schools and businesses, conceived civil rights as an ultimate rather than immediate aim, and believed that blacks must advance economically without them. That Washington's philosophy summarized the conditions of African American life is evident in its consistency with the premises of the Supreme Court's *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision (1892). Although never justly implemented, the "separate but equal" doctrine reflected a real tension between America's egalitarian and racist ideals. Washington affirmed this in his 1895 "Atlanta Compromise" address. To whites he promised: "In all things that are purely social we can be . . . separate"; from blacks he asked for self-improvement through "severe and constant

struggle," for no race "that has anything to contribute to the markets of the world is long in any degree ostracized" (Meier 1963, p. 101; see also Woodward 1971).

A certain kind of Lincoln was needed to represent the realities that Booker T. Washington acknowledged. We can gauge Lincoln's characteristics from black newspapers, which began extensive coverage of Lincoln Day observances during the 1910s.⁵ On the *New York Age's* February 12, 1914, front page, to take one example, Lincoln displays a scroll that connects the Emancipation Proclamation to the ideal of self-reliance: "TO BE REAL CITIZENS," the proclamation declares, "YOU MUST BE SELF-SUPPORTING. THAT IS WHAT YOUR FREEDOM MEANS" (Figure 1). African Americans paired this cartoon with Washington's agenda. "Pairing," according to Alfred Schutz (1970, p. 321), occurs when an object's appearance is associated with another object that does not appear but without which one is unable to understand the first object's significance. That this second, "appresented," object is Washington is evident not only from common knowledge of his self-help and black enterprise philosophy but also from the reprinting of his speech on the same page as the cartoon. Washington invokes Lincoln as he urges black men throughout the nation to obey the law and work diligently to learn skilled trades (*New York Age*, Feb. 12, 1914, p. 1). Proclaiming emancipation through training and investment, Washington becomes the black Abraham Lincoln; proclaiming self-reliance to be the purpose of emancipation, Lincoln becomes the white Booker T. Washington.

Washington's politics seem unheroic today; but in 1914, as "an almost impenetrable gloom settled over the Negro's political prospects" (Franklin 1969, p. 523), his model of politically docile blacks purchasing farms, going into business, and acquiring industrial skills was practicable and noble. One need not underestimate the assertive side of the era's black politics to appreciate Washington's appeal. His vision was rejected by W. E. B. DuBois and the "Talented Tenth" of the black population, but among the masses it was a spiritually fulfilling vision that "gave dignity and purpose to the lives of daily toil" (Harlan 1988, p. 178).⁶ In 1915, Booker T. Washington died a revered and beloved leader.

Although Washington never renounced his hope for racial integration, he and his admirers realized that African Americans could not claim the rights to which white Americans were entitled at birth. Uneducated and untrained, blacks would have to prove their right to full citizenship by hard work and achievement. We know, in hindsight, that Washington was naive to believe this. Excluded from the industrial revolution, blacks were bound to fall far short of Washington's goal, and this is perhaps why their representations of success were so exaggerated and ironic. Exaggeration and irony mark World War I prints showing Lincoln etherealized, looking down on African American soldiers (who were for the most part denied combat roles [Cashman 1991, p. 27]) defeating the German foe (Figure 2). Hyperbole is evident in the awesomeness of the victory; irony, in the makeup of the fighting unit: it is all black, segregated from the rest of the army. Blacks' sacrifice for the nation that rejects them is justified, however, by reference to the man that emancipated them. The real war president, Woodrow Wilson, believed in segregation and attempted to enforce it more widely within the federal government. The white man's war was worth fighting, however, when defined as Lincoln's war.

That World War I inflated African American expectations is evident everywhere, from the widespread and bitter race riots of 1919 to the *New York Age's* front-page cartoon of February 12, 1922, which shows Uncle Sam leading a parade of ethnic minorities marching under a single flag toward a "bigger and better America" based on "law and government." Lincoln,

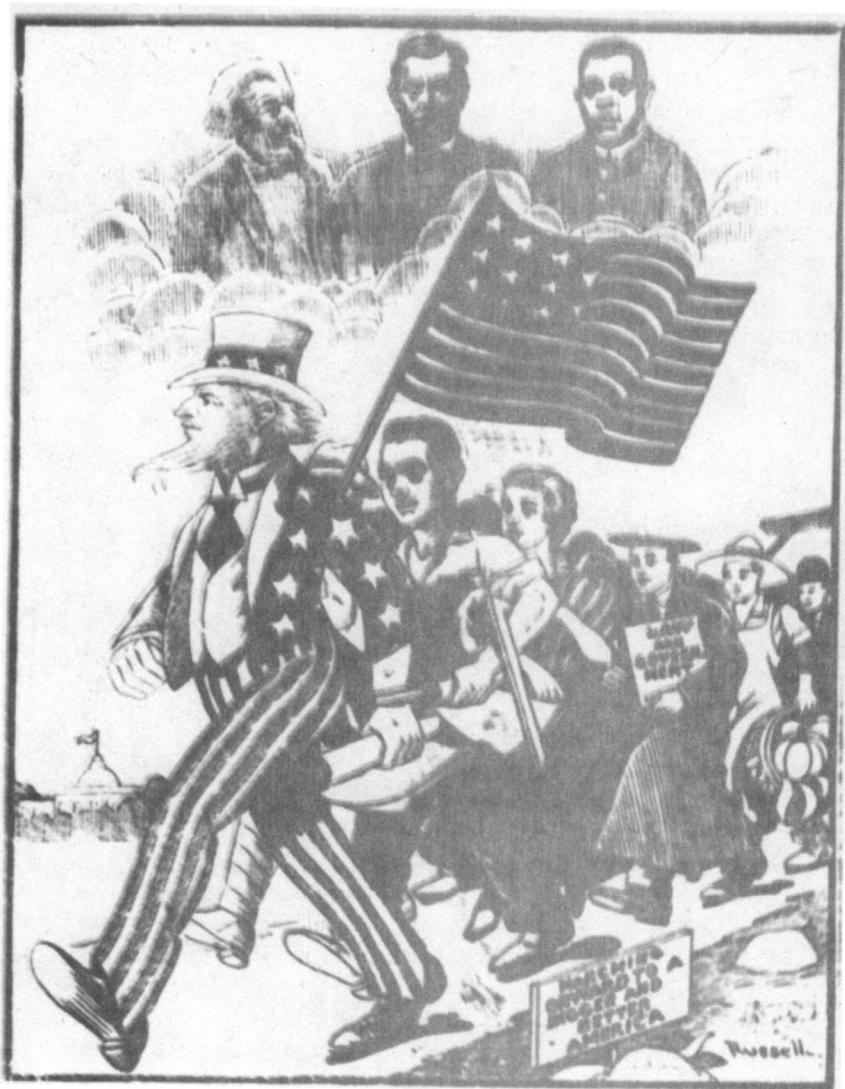


Figure 1. "What Lincoln Would Say If Alive Today," cartoon appearing in the *New York Age*, February 12, 1914.

whose image is explicitly "coupled" (as opposed to being implicitly "paired" [Schutz and Luckmann 1983, pp. 133-134]) with Douglass's and Washington's, looks down from glory (Figure 3). From this picture, one would never know that the African American is the most despised of all minorities: it is he, not a white in the cortege, who carries a carpenter's square and money bag. Below the cartoon appears an excerpt from Booker T. Washington's (1896) Harvard speech (cited in *New York Age*, Feb. 12, 1922, p. 1): "The country demands that every race shall measure itself by the American standard. . . . We are to be tested. . . in our



Figure 2. Charles Gustrine, *True Sons of Freedom*, print, 1918. The Huntington Library, San Marino, California. Courtesy of the Huntington Library.

ability to compete, to succeed in commerce, to disregard the superficial for the real, the appearance for the substance." In this image, as in so many others of the period, Lincoln appears in a context of fictional African American progress.

When this cartoon appeared, the Jim Crow system was still expanding, and hopeful blacks moving into northern cities found themselves enmeshed in segregation patterns similar to the

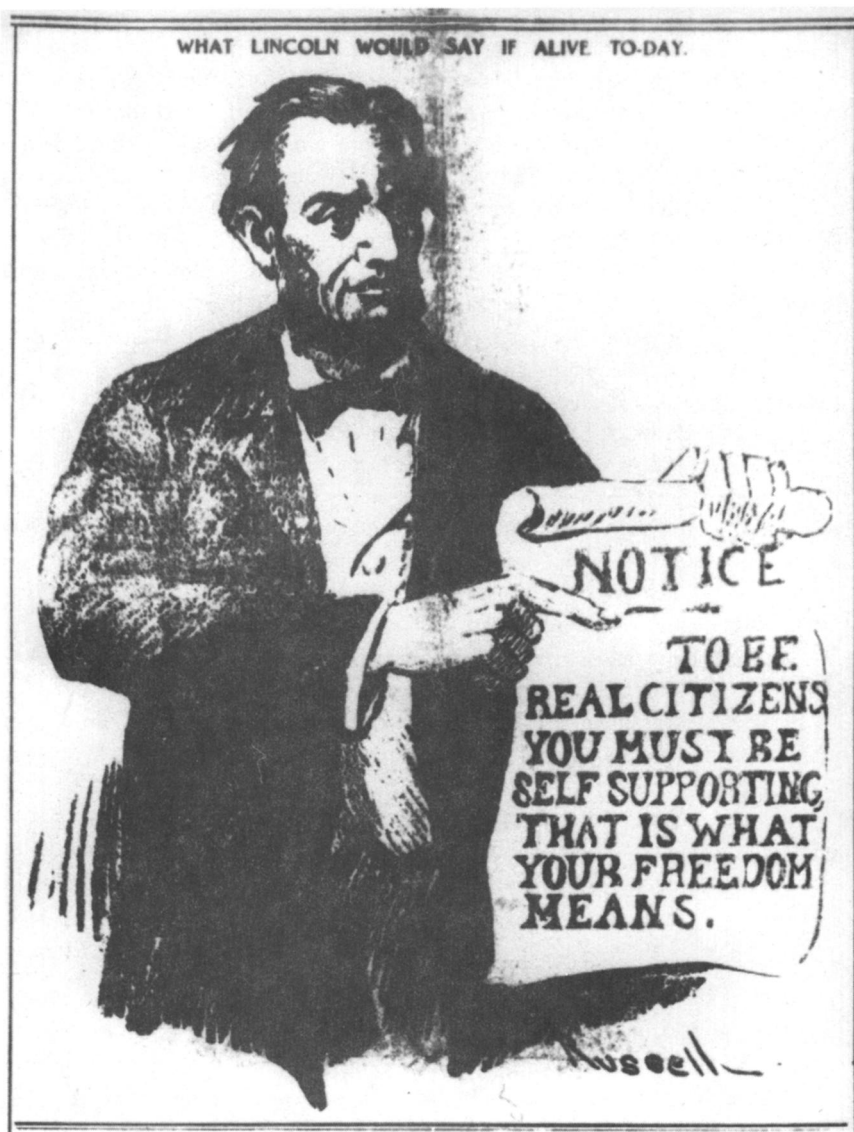


Figure 3. "Marching Toward a Bigger and Better America," cartoon appearing in the *New York Age*, February 12, 1922.

ones they knew in the South. Ku Klux Klan membership peaked in the mid-1920s, with most growth occurring in the northern states (Woodward 1957, p. 101). Lincoln's Republican party provided blacks little support and, prior to 1932, the Democratic party had not seated a single black delegate at any national convention. Realizing that racial justice was to most whites unthinkable apart from segregation, Alain L. Locke justified his call for equal opportunity by explaining that "race amalgamation proceeds much more rapidly where the races are socially and economically unequal" (Washington, DC, *Afro-American*, Mar. 21, 1925, p. 10). Sharing separately in America was the strategy of the "New Negro," as Locke called him (Meier 1963, p. 256).

The *Emancipation Proclamation*, a print found in black homes and schools during the 1920s (Figure 4), reflects the African American predicament. It represents Lincoln holding an excerpt from the Declaration of Independence: "All men are created equal. . . ." When drafted in 1776, this assertion of *legal* equality for white citizens took for granted their *social* inequality; but it is identified in the print as the 1863 Emancipation Proclamation and signed "A. Lincoln." Segregation is thus reconciled with freedom. Blacks who had grown up believing that self-help and elevation would make them equal saw themselves in the *Emancipation* print. Located next to Lincoln, Booker T. Washington holds a diploma in his right hand; beneath his outstretched left arm is a rural scene and a table full of books and work instruments. "We have cleared the land," he says, and are "building railroads, cities, and great institutions." Beneath, a prosperous husband and wife, "whose children are being educated and will become. . . a power in all affairs of life," personify Washington's claim. At the top of the print, cameos of Frederick Douglass and the poet Paul Dunbar, and, at the center, high-ranking black army officers, exemplify the powers of self-help. On the lower left, black soldiers, "the bravest of the brave," attack their country's foes. Above the battle, America embraces a black child and a white child. The slogan, "Look forward: there is room in America for achievements of both," implies that, looking backward, even amid idealizations of black progress, the achievements of only one race, the white, have made any difference. Lincoln thus remains the friend of a backward and separate people.

African Americans purchased prints bearing Abraham Lincoln's likeness—and here we touch on the ultimate purpose of commemoration—because something about those images enriched their lives, rendered their experience in a hostile world meaningful. To toil endlessly for scant reward, to be at once politically aware and politically impotent, to fight a war yet be despised more than the enemy—these experiences were framed by images of Lincoln that enabled African Americans to find dignity in a situation that denied it. Not to avoid suffering but to comprehend and cope with it—such was the aim of the politics of accommodation, the function of Abraham Lincoln's commemoration.

Lincoln and the New Deal

Before the Great Depression, Lincoln's commemoration reinforced the record of his public commitment to a racially divided society. He was commemorated with symbols that represented segregation uncritically and, by emphasizing the theme of racial uplift, implicitly acknowledged the inferiority that had always rationalized whites' demands for segregation. During the New Deal, a new Lincoln articulated new social realities, even while the historical record remained unchanged. The New Deal Lincoln exemplifies commemoration as an ideological enterprise differentiated from history.

Outlines of the new Lincoln were discernible soon after the stock market crashed. From 1929-1933, the year Franklin Roosevelt assumed office, the total volume of American business fell 50 percent. Wages fell at the same rate, and national income declined from 85 to 37 million dollars. Unemployment quadrupled. More than five thousand banks closed. Half a million families lost their homes. Slavery metaphors, popular among suffragists and socialists at the beginning of the century, captured the essence of the new catastrophe. The Pennsylvania Governor Gifford Pinchot (1932, p. 4471) announced, "Our greatest task is to rid our people of the shackles of concentrated wealth and power." Liberty, in Lincoln's view, meant that no man, "black or white," should ever have to bow "in personal or economic submission" to any other man. As slavery symbolized economic want, emancipation became a precedent



Figure 4. F. G. Renesch, *The Emancipation Proclamation*, print, 1919. The Lincoln Museum, Fort Wayne, Indiana. Courtesy of the Lincoln Museum (# 3842).

for state activism. Two years after Roosevelt's election, Carl Sandburg (1934) defined the New Deal as a second Emancipation Proclamation. In 1936, the year Roosevelt won his first landslide reelection, Representative Frank Dorsey of Pennsylvania noted that "Lincoln was the progressive, the New Dealer of his day. If he were alive now he would discern that economic peonage is as terrible a thing as the selling of men on the block" (Jones 1974, p. 69). Republicans seeking positive alternatives to the New Deal also exploited the slavery metaphor. William Allen White (1940, p. 735) told the Springfield (Illinois) Abraham Lincoln Association: "How startling is the parallel of our crisis today: Two million slaves in 1860. Ten million idle men today. . . . The decade of the 1850's, with its slave politics and the decade of the 1930's with its problem of unemployment, present similar, almost parallel, issues in our history." Slavery metaphors revised Lincoln, transforming him from an emancipator of bondsmen to a helper of all men. "Truly enough," Representative Emanuel Celler (1932, p. 4978) explained, "his whole life was dedicated to an attempt to rescue the American underdog and to pull the poor and lowly from between the upper and nether stones of oppression."

Roosevelt's administration transformed Lincoln into a symbol of racial justice as it used him to expound its own "emancipation" policy (Jones 1974). This is not to say that the New Deal itself changed or even typified the popular image of Lincoln, but that particular aspects of this image were part of the era's currents of thought. Lincoln's commemoration symbolized changing ideas about segregation. The New Deal desegregated no schools or neighborhoods, made employers no less biased, and accommodated the South on all important legislation—including its opposition to an antilynching bill. On the other hand, Roosevelt asserted the ideal of racial justice more vigorously than any previous president. His support of equal opportunity legislation and appointment of blacks to government positions, along with Eleanor Roosevelt's public statements and actions on behalf of racial justice, led Gunnar Myrdal to conclude, correctly, that "for almost the first time in the history of the nation the state has done something substantial in a social way without excluding the Negro" ([1944] 1962, p. 74; see also Franklin 1969, pp. 523-545; Wolters 1970; Lash 1971). Voting trends indicate the significance of the change. In 1932, African Americans gave Herbert Hoover his strongest support; in 1936 they gave at least two-thirds of their votes to Franklin Roosevelt.

As political allegiances shifted, assertive protests against racial injustice replaced accommodative themes of self-help and racial betterment. The *Chicago Defender's* 1934 Lincoln Day cartoon, "A Birthday Reminder" (Figure 5), depicts Uncle Sam at a desk strewn with documents on lynching, social ostracism, peonage, segregation, Jim Crow laws, violation of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth (citizenship and voting rights) Amendments, race hatred, and employment discrimination. As a lynching party, visible through the window, celebrates its deed, Lincoln's specter confronts Uncle Sam with a scroll bearing words from the Gettysburg Address: "All men are created equal." Earlier cartoons (Figure 2) show Lincoln endorsing the ideal of justice; here Lincoln challenges whites to make justice a reality. Lincoln had become a vehicle for black criticism of white society.

New Dealers, for their part, portrayed the new Lincoln in front of white audiences—and they were persuasive. Middle-class whites, fearful of losing their own status, identified with the classes below them (McElvaine 1961, pp. 206-223), endorsed Roosevelt's race relations policies (at least so long as they posed no threat to their own interests), and, as they projected their mellowing attitudes upon Lincoln, convinced themselves that racial justice was part of his unfinished business and a fulfillment rather than repudiation of America's social heritage.



Figure 5. "A Birthday Reminder," cartoon appearing in the *Chicago Defender*, February 12, 1934.

The strength of this trend is apparent in the fact that 75 percent of whites outside the South approved of Eleanor Roosevelt's resigning her membership in the organization (Daughters of the American Revolution) that denied the contralto Marion Anderson the use of their auditorium (Gallup 1972, p. 142). The Lincoln Memorial, a symbol of North-South reconciliation in 1922, seemed to the black arrangements committee and white interior secretary the most logical choice among alternative sites for Anderson's 1938 concert (Sandage 1993).

Lincoln's image was associated with many similar developments. Contemplating the most effective time and place to demonstrate against municipal segregation ordinances, Washing-

ton, D.C. residents chose the (1938) opening night of the film, *Abe Lincoln in Illinois*. After the first conviction of the "Scottsboro Boys" was overturned, an eminent jurist likened their attorney's achievement to "laying a rose on Lincoln's grave." In 1940, the U.S. Supreme Court overturned four black defendants' death sentences based on coerced confessions and paired its decision with Lincoln by announcing it on his birthday (*Atlanta Daily World*, Feb. 13, 1940, p. 1). Also on Lincoln's birthday the U.S. Attorney General abolished the District of Columbia Bar Association's ban on black members (*New York Times*, Feb. 13, 1941, p. 12).

Since traditional celebrations of racial solidarity would have been out of place in the context of receding racial barriers, Booker T. Washington's renown lessened with each passing year. Political symbols change, according to Karen Cerulo (1995, pp. 145-166), when their "associative connections" become "blocked" by new political philosophies, new leaders, new collective identities. That Franklin D. Roosevelt replaced Booker T. Washington as Lincoln's twentieth-century successor is evident in the coupling of his portrait, not Washington's, with Lincoln's (and Christ's) in millions of African American homes (Weiss 1983, p. 218). That Lincoln became in turn Roosevelt's nineteenth-century predecessor is evident in the New Deal racial attitudes attributed to him.

If Lincoln's pro-black image emerged from revisionist symbolism, there were no new facts for a revisionist history. Through the decade of the thirties and beyond, Carl Sandburg set the tone of popular Lincoln biography (1926; 1939), and had little or nothing to say about Lincoln's racial attitudes. History textbooks presented the same image. I drew a random sample of thirty history texts from Frances Fitzgerald's (1979) inventory of books widely used in the United States from 1890-1979, then I drew six additional books (1980-1990) from a current social science education inventory. Eleven of the texts published before 1939 marked the Emancipation Proclamation as a defining event in American history, but not one even hinted that Lincoln meant it to be a first step toward racial equality. Lincoln's new role as symbol of racial justice was based on new values, not new facts.

CIVIL RIGHTS AND CULTURAL REVOLUTION

The New Deal was a transitional period wherein racial justice was sought in the context of entrenched segregation. White Americans, no less than the administration they voted into office, were more receptive to African American claims than any previous generation; yet their tolerance for racial integration had a low threshold. Most whites who approved of Eleanor Roosevelt's resigning from the Daughters of the American Revolution would have opposed their children going to school with black students or laboring beside blacks in the workplace (Schuman 1995, pp. 80-81). Segregation remained a solid fact of life throughout World War II. The need for wartime unity, however, led to a significant mellowing of white racial attitudes and a "tidal wave of negative characterizations of the 'racial bigot'" in the national media (Condit and Lucaites 1993, p. 172).

By the end of the 1940s, race relations reform had moved into a new phase. Northern civil rights organizations stepped up their drive to abolish segregation; blacks were leaving the South at the rate of a quarter million a year; the Supreme Court began to strike down local discrimination ordinances; the once compact white ethnic populations of the city scattered into its suburbs; American presidents, beginning with Harry S. Truman and aided by expanding television networks, publicly renounced segregation and its racial presuppositions. In the South, these developments amounted to what C. Vann Woodward (1957, pp. 9-12) called a

New Reconstruction. The issues, however, transcended race. Everywhere, new rights movements arose: employment rights, Native American rights, women's rights, gay rights, prisoners' rights, animal rights. As power distributions changed, social boundaries eroded. Men and women, ethnics and WASPs, blacks and whites appeared more equal than ever before (e.g., Lipset 1981; Bowles and Gintis 1986).

Lincoln, it seemed, set everything in motion. His "work is not yet done," said the New York Governor Mario Cuomo ([1986] 1990, p. 238), for many Americans still suffer "from the oppression of a ruthless economic system" and still know racial, religious, ethnic, and gender discrimination. In a scene from *The Civil War* (Ken Burns's popular television documentary), the historian Barbara Field observes: Union victory "established a standard that will not mean anything until we have finished its work. If some citizens live in houses and others live in the street, the Civil War is still going on. It is still to be fought, and. . . it can still be lost" (quoted in Hayward 1991, p. 26). Lincoln's war aims included neither a poverty-free nor a multiracial society, but in the afterglow of the New Deal and the civil rights movement it seemed they did. The commemorative apparatus had, indeed, reached a stage of development so advanced that its ideological assertions could hardly be distinguished from fact. Almost five years before President Lyndon Johnson declared, "Let the world abandon racism," from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial (*Chicago Defender*, Feb. 13, 1967, p. 1), vandals had marked the centennial of the Emancipation Proclamation by spray-painting the words "nigger lover" on the base of Lincoln's statue—an event that reflected the strength of popular belief in Lincoln's commitment to racial equality.

African American media reinforced this new conviction. On the front page of the *Chicago Defender*, a cartooned Lincoln covers his face in despair as Republican Barry Goldwater makes known his sympathy for the John Birch Society (*Chicago Defender*, Feb. 13, 1964, p. 1). Elsewhere, Coretta King recites Aaron Copland's "Lincoln Portrait" (*Chicago Defender*, Feb. 13, 1969, p. 12) while the governor of Kentucky, seated in the presence of Martin Luther King's brother and Lincoln's statue, makes Kentucky (Lincoln's birthplace) the first southern state to pass a civil rights bill (*Jet*, Feb. 1966, p. 36). At the same time, Martin Luther King reveals his "dream," his plea for racial integration, on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial.

As one ceremony followed another, historical events assumed new meanings. Lincoln's contemporaries at Gettysburg understood the "proposition that all men are created equal" to mean equal opportunity in "the race of life," but for participants at the 1963 Gettysburg Address Centennial, it stood for racial equality (Schwartz 1996a). The meaning of the Emancipation Proclamation changed accordingly. Lincoln drafted this document with colonization in mind, but when Martin Luther King asked President Kennedy to issue a "Second Emancipation Proclamation" (Branch 1988, p. 589), he was defining racial integration as the *purpose* of Lincoln's action. President Johnson affirmed King's interpretation when he signed the historic 1965 Voting Rights Act in the room where Lincoln had signed the Emancipation Proclamation (Fleming 1992, p. 59).

Lincoln's late twentieth-century interpreters, white and black alike, made him a symbol of minority causes by pairing and coupling him with political opinions he probably never held and with political ideals to which he was probably never committed. Throughout the 1960s, Lincoln's birthday was the date chosen for initiating Chicago's Great Society programs, including job training for young women and the opening of Urban Opportunity Centers throughout the city. On this day, the city's annual Youth Service Conference was held and its

speakers photographed and featured by the press. Meanwhile, Negro History Week celebrations connected Lincoln to Frederick Douglass and W. E. B. DuBois. Directly or by implication, each ritual event contemporized Lincoln by attributing to him mid-twentieth-century social and political sympathies. Each event construed Lincoln through symbolic resources—visual and ritual apostrophes, metaphors, hyperbole, personification, antitheses—that formed an image to which African Americans turned to make sense of their changing place in society.

An analysis of high school history texts suggests that commemorative symbolism shaped Lincoln's image independently of what historians were saying. In eight representative textbooks published from 1940-1959, Lincoln appears as he did in earlier texts—a great emancipator with no interest in race relations reform. Several of the seventeen texts published after 1960 depict Lincoln's sympathy for the plight of the individual slave and some attribute to Lincoln the desire to make America a multiracial society, but always by insinuation, never on the basis of evidence. "Revisionist" biographies, on the other hand, directly undermined the integrationist Lincoln portrait. James G. Randall (1946), Richard Hofstadter (1948), Benjamin Thomas (1952), Donald W. Riddle (1957), and Reinhard Luthin (1960) recognized Lincoln's greatness, but they all considered him a pragmatic politician who had little in common with the radical reformers of his day. Writing from a different standpoint, the new psychohistorians (Wilson 1962; Forgie 1979; Anderson 1982; Strozier 1982) came to an extreme conclusion: Lincoln led his country to war not in response to radical pressures from within his party but in order to satisfy personal ambition. There were exceptions to these portrayals (e.g., Cox 1981), but, on the whole, historiography and commemoration were moving in opposite directions. During the Depression, the symbolic Lincoln changed while the historical Lincoln remained intact; after the Depression, the former remained the same while the latter changed: as white and black radicals' assaults against Lincoln peaked, he remained a symbol of racial equality. Lincoln may have been "the Great Equivocator," as I. F. Stone called him, or the "white supremacist" that Lerone Bennett believed him to be; he may have done "more to trick Negroes than any other man in history," as Malcolm X claimed (Fehrenbacher 1987, pp. 100, 207); but it was his commemorative cult—the icons, shrines, and observances (the lieux de memoire)—that reached and affected the most people.

The cult did not affect everyone. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, African Americans considered Lincoln to be America's greatest president. In the 1985 and 1991 Gallup ratings of America's presidents, black respondents assigned Lincoln a distant second place behind John F. Kennedy. The percentage of blacks naming Lincoln a great president in these years and of whites naming Franklin Roosevelt were almost identical. Thus, Lincoln's shadow has become smaller, but it remains the shadow of a great man.

CONCLUSION

I have tried to advance, in some slight measure, our understanding of commemoration by treating it as a cultural force in its own right, identifying its vehicles, and exploring how the "positional meaning" of its object changes. "The positional meaning of a symbol," according to Victor Turner (1967, p. 51), "derives from its relationship to other symbols in a totality, a *Gestalt*, whose elements acquire their significance from the system as a whole." This article shows that representations of the past are so interconnected that the invocation of one representation activates and defines others in the system and is in turn mobilized and defined by them. Commemoration refers to the actual working of this system of symbolic representations.

As an object in a commemorative network, Abraham Lincoln never stands alone. He gains attention by taking a place in a field occupied by others. Rituals and symbols shape the perception of Lincoln by incorporating him into this field, this commemorative network, this family of past heroes and events that share traits that black communities value. To activate Lincoln's memory through a newspaper article, statue, painting, cartoon, or ceremonial observance is to activate memories that include but extend beyond him. Hence the constant coupling and pairing of Lincoln and representative black leaders. Lincoln's significance changes as each new generation places him in a commemorative network composed of new members, such as Martin Luther King (Figure 6), not present in previous networks. At any given time, the coupling and pairing processes fan out broadly not only within a network of people whose prestige enhances and is enhanced by Lincoln's but also to networks of events (Supreme Court decisions, job programs, Negro History Week activities). In such mnemonic webs, such *réseaux de memoire*, existing Lincoln memories are organized, their institutional roots deepened, and a new and autonomous collection of beliefs about him accumulates. Common features of people and events with which Lincoln is ritually connected are generalized to Lincoln himself. In this way, Lincoln has changed through the twentieth century from a conservative symbol of the social and economic status quo to a liberal symbol of social and economic reform.

Commemoration, as Lincoln's case suggests, is a structuring process that partially overrides the qualities of its objects and imposes upon them its own pattern. The key to this process is not the mere act of pairing or coupling one historical actor with another; it is the attribution to one actor (in this case Lincoln) of qualities of other individuals located in the same network of memory. Commemoration fills in what was lacking in Lincoln by generalizing the qualities of others deemed similar to him.

The structuring power of commemorative symbols—holiday and ceremonial observances, printed and oratorical commentary, cartoons, statues, paintings—is evident not only in the way African Americans use Lincoln's image to articulate their situations and experiences but also in the way Lincoln's image depends on characteristics generalized from his own predecessors. When Lincoln ran for the presidency, Republican organizers "campaign[ed] down" to the people by associating him with symbols of railsplitting and the frontier; but when he assumed the presidency his supporters portrayed him in a more dignified light. Their prints showed him gazing at a bust of George Washington, standing beneath or next to Washington's portrait in the presence of familiar symbols of state. Lincoln himself helped to establish these representations. He regularly compared his problems to those Washington had faced. He launched military offensives on Washington's birthday. And when Lincoln died, eulogists compared his character to George Washington's, mourners placed portraits of Washington beside his coffin, and citizens purchased prints showing Washington welcoming him into glory. Thus, Lincoln's new and ennobled image resulted not only from his achievements but also from new symbolic connections. It is to the making and publicizing of these connections that I refer when I use the term "commemorative symbolism." Such connections, as Emile Durkheim ([1915] 1965, p. 262) said, "do not confine themselves to revealing the mental state with which they are associated: they aid in creating it."

Lincoln's changing image legitimates changing social realities by making them seem continuous with his values and intentions. And this continuity, if I may speculate, results less from conscious design than from what James M. Fields and Howard Schuman (1976-1977, pp. 435-442) call "looking glass perceptions"—the powerful tendency to see our own

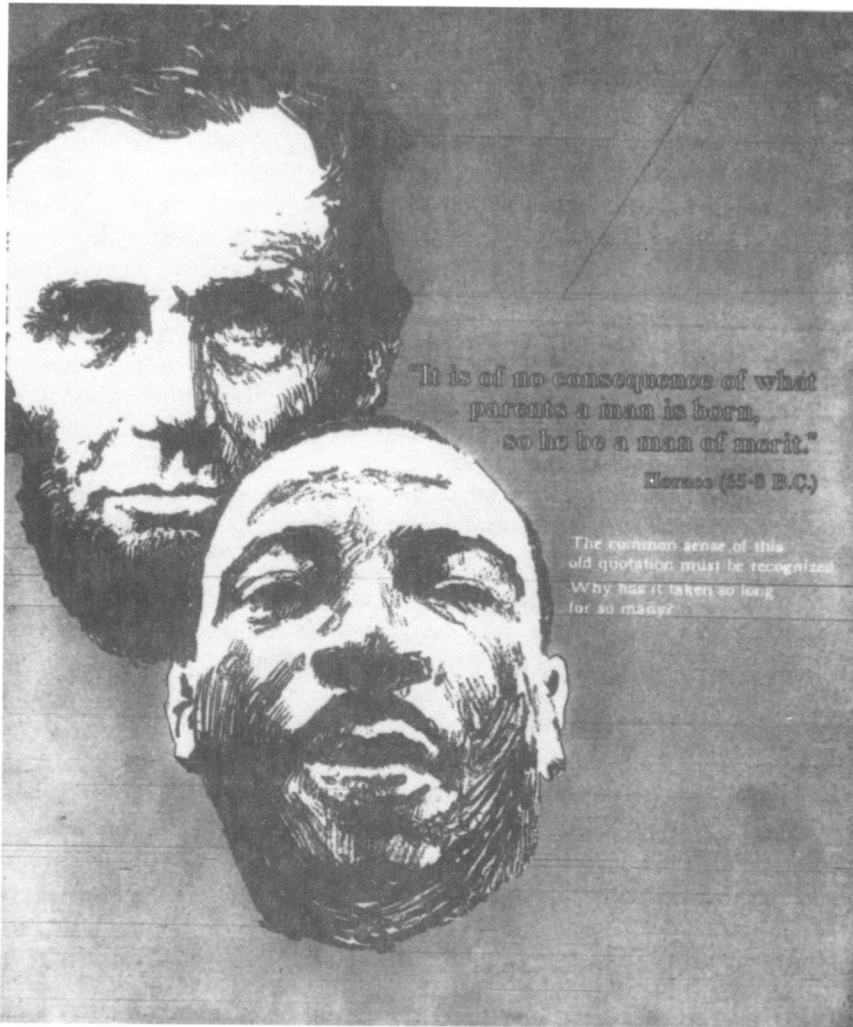


Figure 6. *Martin Luther King, Jr. and Abraham Lincoln*, print, *Ebony*, February, 1971, p. 10. Courtesy of Johnson Publishing Company.

thoughts and values in others (see also Schuman 1995). Applied to our predecessors, looking glass perceptions exaggerate consensus over time. It is hard for most Americans to imagine Abraham Lincoln referring to the slaves he emancipated as “niggers” or deliberately planning to ship them to other continents. It is easier to imagine his thinking of slaves as we do: ordinary men and women who have been wronged and must be welcomed into society as full citizens. It is easier to think this way of Lincoln because our sense of who we are as a nation presupposes a sense of who he was as a person.

If construction is the essence of memory, however, it is not enough to attribute new qualities to Lincoln in order to transform his image; the entire field in which Lincoln resides must be recreated. As Karen Cerulo (1991, pp. 114, 125) puts it: “The *combination* of a symbol’s elements conveys a meaning that may differ from that of any single element of the symbol.

Meaning, then, is largely contingent on the syntactic structure of the symbol.” Historians, it is true, also combine previously discrete units of knowledge to produce new understandings; but they do so within a methodological framework that defines proper and improper uses of evidence. In many places (mainly but not only in non-Western nations), historians trained in critical historiography still accede to pressures to produce gratifying images of the past (Shils 1981, pp. 54-62), but even in these nations history and commemoration, like science and ideology, are different lines of work (Geertz 1973, p. 231): the former combines evidence, however selective or biased, to justify belief; the latter combines symbols to sanctify belief.

Commemoration and history, however, are not *separate* lines of work. This is why it is necessary to amend Maurice Halbwachs’s radical differentiation of collective memory and history. My findings justify his belief that collective memory “requires the support of groups delimited in time and space” while history remains relatively autonomous ([1950] 1980, p. 84). Collective memory, however, cannot always be dismissed as a distortion of history. The remaking of Abraham Lincoln is based on some invention and much exaggeration, but it is also constrained by the historical record. Lincoln and his supporters may have seen no necessary connection between freeing slaves and assimilating them as equals, but dedication to racial equality is inferable from the crisis of emancipation.

If Lincoln’s historical role had been less decisive, his place in the black community’s memory would not now be what it is. African Americans made Lincoln a symbol of racial equality by starting with the real man and improving him: “omitting the inessential and adding whatever was necessary to round out the ideal” (Cooley 1918, p. 116). Their commemorative networks fabricated a racial equality champion out of a “colonizationist” because that colonizationist *did* something to make the transformation plausible. The materials of the “constructed” past, after all, include facts as well as biases and interests. In democratic societies, where all historical interpretations are open to criticism, constructions of the past must be undertaken within the limits of obdurate reality—limits that no one can ignore without cost (Schudson 1992, pp. 205-221; Fine 1991). In this sense, Lincoln’s commemorative networks, which celebrate the liberation of the slave, do not distort history. These networks value history; they identify and lift the morally significant events out of the historical chronicle and set them apart from and above the mundane.

Whites and blacks have situated Lincoln in separate commemorative networks, but the resulting images have not been utterly different. As Lincoln has symbolized the relation between the races, white images of him have reinforced and ultimately shaped rather than contradicted black images. Both images are rooted in the reality they interpret. For African Americans, therefore, the “good Lincoln” never replaced the “bad” but was only superimposed upon him. To be simultaneously interrogated and commemorated, condemned and canonized—such has been the fate of the Great Emancipator.

Abraham Lincoln’s fate, however, cannot be separated from the commemorative structures in which his image is encased. This is because the symbolism of commemoration does more than idealize the past; it makes the past conceivable. Like certain forms of art, commemoration’s primary power is the power of “formulating experience, and presenting it objectively for contemplation” (Langer 1957, p. 133). Yet this process has been little researched. The agenda of collective memory studies, focusing mainly on generational worldviews and the politics of memory, has represented the past as a model *of* the present society: a mirror of its collective needs, fears, and aspirations, a reflection of its structures of privilege and power (e.g., Gillis 1994; Bodnar 1992). But there are other problems to be addressed, including

commemoration's framing of current conditions and events. To approach this problem, commemoration must be understood as a model *for* the present society, a "program" that articulates collective values and provides cognitive, affective, and moral orientation for realizing them. This semiotic conception of culture (Schwartz 1996b) is based on a simple but strong premise: that "every conscious perception is. . .an act of recognition, a pairing in which an object (or an event, an act, an emotion) is identified by placing it against the background of an appropriate symbol" (Geertz 1973, p. 215; 1983). Commemorative objects are "appropriate symbols" because they transform collective memory into a framework on which people rely to make sense of their experience. African American conceptions of Abraham Lincoln exemplify the changing contours of this framework, but the process must be examined in other times and contexts: in mass entertainment as well as politics, in marking evil as well as virtue, in creating as well as maintaining and reshaping celebrity, in opposing as well as affirming political order, in the failure as well as success of ritual. Until tasks like these are undertaken, the semiotics of commemoration will remain an undeveloped field.

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NOTES

1. For a discussion of public opinion on this matter, including an account of the Illinois exclusion law forbidding black immigration and providing penalties for bringing blacks into the state, see Strickland (1963).

2. The most elaborate case for Lincoln as a prophet of racial equality is presented by Cox (1981). She believes there was "considerable consistency" between Lincoln's pre-presidential and presidential attitudes, which included "an active commitment to equality beyond freedom from bondage" (pp.20, 22). The most widely held pro-Lincoln view, however, is that he did not outgrow his prejudice until he became president. See also Lightner (1982) and Cain (1964).

3. The largest collection of American slave narratives was assembled by the Works Progress Administration in 1937. For a discussion of the methodological pitfalls attending the narratives, see Escott 1979.

4. Emancipation itself was a major source of blacks'dissatisfaction with Lincoln. Since most freedmen were excluded from the postwar industrial revolution, the end of slavery brought decades of uncertainty and want. This problem was mentioned by more than 20 percent of former slaves answering questions about Lincoln in 1937.

5. From 1885-1905, the *New York Age*, like other black newspapers, reported few Lincoln Day festivities; however, from 1905-1909, the *Age* published 36 entries, mostly on the 1909 centennial of Lincoln's birth, then 54 entries from 1910-1914, and 73 entries from 1915-1920 (Schwartz 1990, pp.89).

6. Booker T. Washington subsidized and exerted a strong influence over many African American newspapers, including the *New York Age*. Washington, in fact, assumed financial control of the *Age* in 1907.

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