The Changing Image of Abraham Lincoln

Among African Americans

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The end of the Civil War brought about a change among African-Americans in their views about Lincoln. After the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation, Lincoln’s popularity among African-Americans was at its peak; however, today many question Lincoln’s motives. While most regard Lincoln as the man who simply freed the slaves, others consider him a deceptive president who befriended the slave owner and misled the slave. This image of Abraham Lincoln among African-Americans has shifted consistently since his death in 1865. This essay will address three questions: 1.) What has been the changing image of Lincoln before and after his death? 2.) What are the arguments regarding Abraham Lincoln’s roles in the Emancipation Proclamation? and 3.) What were the immediate benefits of the Emancipation Proclamation to African-American education?

After Lincoln’s signature on the Emancipation Proclamation most African-Americans considered him to be God-like. To the newly freed slave, Lincoln was regarded as their deliverer who released the chains of bondage. The Lincoln Statue in Washington, D.C. erected in 1876, depicts a slave kneeling before Lincoln. At the time, these images of Lincoln were unquestionable, because Lincoln was considered as more than a departed hero. To the majority of slaves, Lincoln was viewed as a martyr.

African-American’s affection for Lincoln was of unyielding gratitude. In their [slaves] eyes, Lincoln was a man like them, “His birth like ours was obscure; he was of lowly origins and has toiled from poverty—they had toiled up from slavery.” (Peterson, 1994) Celebrations began soon after his death, honoring his memory and the proclamation that made him renowned. In Louisiana and Texas, the day of the Emancipation Proclamation Decree is celebrated on June nineteenth and recognized as the Juneteenth holiday.

After Lincoln’s death, African-Americans commemorated his life with celebrations, holidays, and parades. Portraits of Lincoln portray the president as an angel or saintly man, while statues embody him as an emancipator who freed the humble slave. Most African-Americans expressed admiration for Lincoln by articulating their reverence for him in speech, sometimes comparing Lincoln to Moses. Famed author Benjamin Quarles wrote that Lincoln “met head on the greatest challenge to his country” by freeing the slaves. It is a matter of historical record that “the Negros loved him first and loved him the longest” (Peterson, 1994).

From Booker T. Washington to W.E.B. Dubois, African-American leaders held a certain gratitude toward Lincoln and often paid homage to him through celebrations or marches. Before performing for the Daughters of American Revolution at the Lincoln Memorial, Marion Anderson acknowledged Lincoln by remembering and thanking him in his role for blacks. In 1957, Clarence Mitchell, Director of the Washington Branch of the NAACP’s celebrated the third anniversary of the Brown decision at the Lincoln Memorial. In 1963, Martin Luther King, Jr. paid homage to Lincoln by presenting his signature “I Have A Dream” speech at the Lincoln Memorial.

This image of Lincoln as the great emancipator endured until the late 1960’s when the admiration African Americans for Lincoln declined. Lincoln’s positive and profound image was criticized when questions regarding his motives for signing the proclamation arose. Former editor of Ebony Magazine, Lerone Bennett, Jr. wrote an editorial in Ebony attacking Lincoln’s motives for the Emancipation Proclamation.
The 1968 article written by Lerone Bennett entitled, "Was Lincoln a White Supremacist?" established Lincoln as "not the Great Emancipator" and questioned the traditional honest Abe image of Lincoln (Bennett, 1968). Mr. Bennett states that the stories of the great sixteenth president were misleading and untrue and that, "...Lincoln was an opportunist, not an idealist. There was not, in his view, enough room in America for black and white people... [Lincoln] proposed a black exodus...Lincoln told the black men that it was their duty to leave" (Bennett, 1968).

Bennett’s article points from Lincoln’s speech in Charleston on September 18, 1858, where Lincoln expressed his views against equality for blacks, political opportunities for blacks (voting and jury), and intermarriage between blacks and whites. His article raised a series of questions in the African-American community. Lerone Bennett’s article went under attack and scrutiny by other writers opposing his editorial. Herbert Mitgang, a writer for *The New York Times* refuted Bennett’s article in a commentary appropriately entitled “Was Lincoln Just a Honkie?” Mitgang’s article printed in 1968 simply argued,

“...Lincoln wanted to argue the merits of freedom on libertarian grounds. The passage [regarding Lincoln's Charleston Speech] was made in the heat of campaign and he [Lincoln] dropped this theme thereafter, and indeed again preached the doctrine of Negro equality. Lincoln sent a special message to Congress...to abolish slavery. To brand Lincoln a white supremacist is to call the Emancipation Proclamation, the constitutional amendments against slavery and for freedom, and the defeat of the Confederacy and its inhuman ‘institution’ anti-Negro acts.” (Mitgang, 1968).

Bennett’s article along with future books would leave a profound impact on the image of Lincoln and the Emancipation Proclamation in the African-American community. The story that was once so comforting, so real, and enduring, is now misleading and false. Now many would begin to question whether Lincoln just a profession politician looking for votes? Today, when asked about Lincoln, the views among the African-Americans students would be indifferent or diverse.

The Emancipation Proclamation was seen as a document with immeasurable possibilities. To the slave, it symbolized freedom and hope for equality. It not only represented liberation, but it also implied American citizenship. The proclamation was a true testament that all people of color were no longer an enslaved people.

After the passage of the proclamation January 1, 1863, the majority of slaves in the North and South were of good cheer when the news came of their freedom. All free people of color knew that “...by the time the Union forces arrived in their vacinity, [they] were more than ready and willing to seize the opportunity for freedom” (Medford, 1999).

While thousands of blacks celebrated Lincoln’s decree, others were not so grateful. Most Northern black newspapers questioned why Lincoln prolonged to pass the bill. Others believed that Lincoln’s motives in declaring the proclamation was simply a war measure in order to weaken the Confederate army and strengthen the Union side with more black troops. Critics have argued that Lincoln’s role was to make sure the proclamation “...contained no indictment of slavery, but simply based emancipation on “military necessity” (Hofstader, 1976). The purpose was to allow the freed slaves to leave their strict surroundings and fight for the Union.

One discrepancy regarding Lincoln and the proclamation was that it did not emancipate all slaves. The document omitted the lower slave states from its terms. Critics have also claimed that Lincoln signed the proclamation to prevent other nations from aiding the Confederacy and that nations like England were forced, “...to choose between a nation of slave holders and one committed to freedom” (Medford, 1999).
Despite opponent’s views, there are researchers who argue that Lincoln’s role for the Emancipation Proclamation was to preserve the Union and free the slaves. They deduce that Lincoln prolonged the final proclamation, because the preliminary emancipation only declared freedom to states in rebellion. Lincoln opposed slavery and charged that it endangered democracy. Lincoln contended that, “...in America there was room enough for all to be free and for all to earn a decent living” (Cox, 1981). To him [Lincoln] the relationship of the master to the slave was a denial of the great principle that governments derived their powers from the consent of the government.

Lincoln also declared that no man was good enough to govern another man without that man’s consent. Lincoln also opposed slavery on moral grounds and acknowledged that “slavery was a contradiction to the basic law of God and that of freedom” (Quarles, 1962). Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation left a profound impact on the education of African-Americans. Not only did Lincoln extend freedom to slaves, but also restructured education for people of color.

Lincoln financed societies to aid in Reconstruction, employment, training and education for freedmen. Four years prior to the end of the Civil War, Louis Tappan, of the American Missionary Association sent teachers to open the first day school for the freed persons at Hampton University. By 1864, the American Missionary Association sent more than 250 Northern teachers to the South. On March 3, 1865, the Freedman’s Bureau was established for the purpose of resettling and educating Africans in the South. The response of the Freedman’s Bureau was so massive that by 1865, the Freedman’s Bureau set up 4,000 schools, hired 9,000 teachers and taught 250,000 Africans how to read and write.

Lincoln University (1854) and Fisk University (1866) were two schools founded with Lincoln’s aid that attracted a large number of African-American students. Some African-Americans spent years securing educational degrees as teachers in order to serve others. The philosophy, “...each one teach one” was the motto of primary focus in the African-American community. Those who gained the basic education from these schools rushed to teach those with no education.

The law that Lincoln initiated led to even greater developments in educating the free people of color. With the passage of the Emancipation Proclamation, the African-American was given the tools to advance and carry on that insatiable desire for knowledge. The Emancipation Proclamation led to progression in education and advancements for African-Americans.

References


Hofstader, Richard. (1976). The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made...


