



First in a series of articles examining the Lincoln myth vs. reality

By Jerry Kohn

LINCOLN'S LEGACY: "LAND OF LINCOLN"

Next week, we celebrate the 200th anniversary of the birth of Abraham Lincoln. But should we be celebrating? Lincoln has become an iconic figure in American politics. Politicians on both sides of the aisle sing his praises. In government-run ("public") schools, Lincoln is lionized for saving the union and as a champion for racial justice and equality. Criticizing or questioning Lincoln or his legacy is virtually unthinkable. Nevertheless, it is vital to the future of liberty that we reassess both the man and his legacy.

AMERICAN BLOOD SPILLED IN CATASTROPHIC, AVOIDABLE WAR

If the measure of Presidential greatness is how much blood was spilled, how much treasure wasted or plundered, or how much power abused, Lincoln surpasses all others. Elected to the Presidency in 1860 with only 40% of the popular vote, Lincoln needlessly plunged the nation into what remains to this day its deadliest and most destructive war. Before it was over more than 630,000 Americans, North and South lay dead, roughly 2% of the entire population at the time--equivalent to 6 million deaths today--and virtually the entire new Confederate nation lay in ruins. And while the war brought a violent and chaotic end to slavery, this was never Lincoln's intention, and it was done in such a way as to leave a legacy of racial bitterness and division that haunts us still. Along the way, Lincoln also set political precedents such as military conscription, inflationary paper money, and massive federal subsidies that ultimately gave us the corrupt leviathan state we live with today.

LINCOLN: THE MYTH OF THE GREAT EMANCIPATOR

While occasionally expressing sympathy for the slaves, Lincoln, as a Springfield legislator, voted in favor of banning free Black people from immigrating to Illinois. Lincoln also supported the Fugitive Slave Act and belonged to an association favoring the deportation of all free Black people to Africa. Later, as President, Lincoln supported the infamous Corwin Amendment that if passed would have forever banned any federal attempt to limit or abolish slavery. In his first inaugural address Lincoln repeatedly stressed that he had no intention of interfering with the institution of slavery where it existed (though he was concerned that the Southwest territories be kept free of Black people – free or slave). Lincoln was generally despised by the principled abolitionists of his day. Abolitionist writer William Lloyd Garrison once said of Lincoln, "He had not a drop of anti-slavery blood in his veins." Though Lincoln later issued the Emancipation Proclamation, the proclamation freed no one as it only applied to slaves held in Confederate territory. Lincoln's later proposals for broader emancipation proved equally ambiguous and hesitant while more courageous and radical voices led Lincoln along. Lincoln apologists may retort that Lincoln was merely reflecting the prejudices of his time, and political necessity required that he refrain from acting more boldly, but greatness requires more than being swept along by history on so great a question.

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