

The Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln and American Slavery

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Author:

Eric Foner

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Sebastian Page

I suspect that, at some level, Eric Foner was always going to write this book. He openly acknowledges in *The Fiery Trial* that Lincoln has always loomed large in his research – even if he had not hitherto taken centre stage as subject – ever since he wrote his doctoral dissertation over four decades ago. Author or editor of more than 20 works on American history, Columbia's DeWitt Clinton Professor has long straddled the Civil War years with his pre-eminent *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men* (1970) and *Reconstruction* (1988), while he has traversed the period 1861–5 many times with broader projects and longer narratives. Yet only now, in the wake of editing *Our Lincoln* (2008), has Foner turned his full attention to the defining figure of that era.⁽¹⁾

Perhaps that's a bit misleading, though, since *The Fiery Trial*, according to the author's own statement of purpose, 'is intended to be both less and more than another biography' (p. xvi). Less, in that Foner has not tried to submit a rehashed or comprehensive life of Lincoln to what is, without hyperbole, the most crowded of historical fields. More, in that he wants to tease out Abe's precise thinking on slavery at different points, whilst seeking at the same time to break what he (rightly) identifies as the self-referential mould of Lincoln scholarship, and to show how exposure to evolving public opinion and to new circles of people changed an individual's thinking.

Indeed, Foner's introduction provides a concise and highly self-aware thumbnail sketch of where the historiography stands, and how he is looking to correct it. From the outset he promises to avoid explicit reference to other historians' work, and I would not want to put words in his mouth by offering any names that he might have in mind. (I should also add that this deliberate omission at no point sees him make straw men of others, and that it succeeds in keeping the narrative smooth and attractive to the popular market). In

any case, many of us will know what he means when he writes of the trend towards over-specialisation in Lincoln studies – and its concomitant weakness of self-referential thinking – and of the kind of glib reductionism that identifies ‘a single quotation, speech or letter as the real or quintessential Lincoln’ (pp. xvii–xix).

The author’s leitmotif is one of Lincoln’s capacity for growth. He therefore places himself between two antagonistic interpretations: the first – and perhaps the more common one – that the 16th president entered the White House determined to pick away at slavery as quickly as advancing northern sentiment would allow, and the second, that he lacked personal conviction and went wherever uncontrollable political forces took him. Foner also suggests that African-American and white abolitionist agitation helped change the context in which Lincoln and the Republican Party operated, allowing him to stake out positions that they had occupied and legitimised first. With this insight, he hopes to kill two historiographical birds with one stone: namely, the common dismissal of radical antislavery as impractical and extreme, and a tendency to treat public opinion as somewhat prone to inertia. As a theme, this becomes much more pronounced in the second half of *The Fiery Trial*, which covers Lincoln’s time in office (pp. xviii–xix).

In fact, Lincoln comes across in this book as rather consistent throughout his pre-war life – or at least, during as much as we know of it – in his broad outlook on slavery. This is where Foner excels, bringing out the nuances and twists involved in taking a fairly steady course through changing circumstances. He takes as sincere Lincoln’s declaration of lifelong opposition to slavery as fundamentally unjust and un-republican, and highlights the continuity in his belief that the federal government was perfectly able – though was not necessarily *obliged*, as the ‘freedom national’ doctrine would have had it – to extirpate slavery where it fell under its jurisdiction. But Foner adds that this also came with a package of certain limitations, one comprising not only enjoinders to respect the institution’s constitutional and legal protections, but also a striking lack of either outward sympathy for free blacks or personal antipathy towards the South, and no shortage of hostility to abolitionism.

Thus it was that Lincoln could find himself almost alone in issuing a formal protest against a resolution of the Illinois legislature that Congress had no power to abolish slavery in the District of Columbia. This was an aspiration that he later discussed with abolitionist Joshua Giddings once he had reached Washington, a decade later. But thus it also was – and no less significantly – that in the meantime, his commitment to his lawyerly duties in the Matson case had seen him anticipate aspects of Roger Taney’s logic in *Dred Scott*, while Representative Lincoln initially clocked up one of the 30th Congress’s most conservative voting records on slavery for a northern Whig. Although Foner is not the first historian to recount such episodes – unsurprisingly, he never could be – he accords them greater coverage, contextualisation and weighing-up than most.

The author’s Lincoln enters the 1850s in flux and possibly a little frustrated, still devoted to the conservative emancipation advocated by Henry Clay but aware of its shortcomings, and armed with ‘developed antislavery ideas but not a coherent antislavery ideology’ (p. 62), nor a way to pursue antislavery goals within the political system. What follows is necessarily a familiar story, but Foner again manages to step back from his subject in a way that keeps the book compelling, even if with no more than an occasional light prick of the mythology balloon. He challenges Lincoln’s 1858 explanation for his late arrival on the antislavery scene – which was that it had been a ‘minor question’ with him until the Kansas-Nebraska Act overturned what he had taken as a national consensus – with the simple observation that for this to be true, Lincoln would have had to turn a blind eye to the fact of the addition of nine new slave states, and a quadrupling of the slave population, between 1787 and 1854. Foner attributes Lincoln’s rise to his impressive rhetoric, but reminds us that all Republicans drew extensively on Jefferson and the Founders, and that he was not a little lucky to inhabit the same state as Stephen Douglas, since his political credentials all the way down to 1860 would be earned solely in challenging the opposition’s presumptive presidential nominee.

Yet the author is in no way out to debunk the pre-war Lincoln – who is, after all, such an easy target for anachronism-inspired cherry picking from the *Collected Works* – and sure enough, he comes out rather

intriguingly in some of Foner's comparisons. While most Republicans simply attacked Taney for addressing the territorial question where he need not have done, 'Lincoln addressed head-on the vexatious question of black citizenship' (p. 95), which was no small risk in the Midwest. (Of course, he also *had* to address the matter in such a region; but it was a dangerous business all the same, especially when delivering remarks such as those in the Galesburg debate, which Foner considers the most egalitarian sounds that Lincoln ever made). And despite deeply held convictions of the superiority of free labour, he never argued in terms of the stagnation of the South and its need for economic modernisation through emancipation – even though, for conservative anti-slavery forces, this was often as low a common denominator as the non-extension of the institution.

Foner's chapter on the 1860 election and secession reads a bit closer to a conventional account of events, though this is inevitable in such a work. (Indeed, *The Fiery Trial* strikes an admirable balance between trying to shift the focus of what might otherwise look like a normal Lincoln biography or general history of the period towards questions of race and slavery, whilst not forgetting the man himself, or sacrificing the flow of the narrative for an unduly narrow definition of what should come under the rubric). Wartime finds Lincoln devoted to promoting the border states' own emancipation efforts on gradual terms with compensation and colonisation, and even more so when the prospect of general emancipation in the Confederate South starts to loom. As such, the infamous meeting with the African-American deputation, the clauses attached to the Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, and the constitutional amendments suggested in the Second Annual Message do not add up to a cynical attempt to appease a racist backlash, as many historians would argue.

But the end of 1862 does represent 'a crucial moment of transition' for Lincoln (p. 238), and his proclamation of 1 January 1863 – which came with no reference to colonisation, compensation or gradualism – is transformative. Unlike in many accounts, Foner's Lincoln had not entirely shed such thinking, and would still toy with these policies from time to time. (The author asks how a man familiar with Illinois's questionable history of indentured servitude and the poor example of emancipation in the British Caribbean could really have considered apprenticeship even into the second half of the war, which certainly gave me pause for thought). The Proclamation had set a new baseline for administration policy, however, and its call for black recruitment set in motion long-deferred questions in Lincoln's mind about African-Americans' place in society and entitlement to certain rights.

In addition to the more familiar claims surrounding the black contribution to the war effort, though, the author stresses the effect of the president's encounters with 'talented, politically active black men and women' once in the White House (p. 257). This was what had been missing almost all his life until the Civil War; what had marked him out from abolitionists and colleagues like Charles Sumner and Salmon Chase; and what had given his brand of anti-slavery a moral but rather abstract air. Taken out of Illinois – which, for all the lurid fears that had inspired and maintained the Black Laws, had a very small African-American population – and placed on a larger geographical and social stage, Lincoln's prejudices began to soften, even if he never became a fully-fledged egalitarian. (Indeed, Foner makes a rare comparison to what we can discern of his thinking on Indians, and reckons that his old frontier assumptions, combined with a lack of personal engagement with Native Americans or with a pressure group equivalent to abolitionists, witnessed no improvement on that score). Whilst committed above all to the military situation, and to securing – through state constitutions and eventually the 13th Amendment – the legally shaky emancipation of his Proclamation, Foner's Lincoln was nevertheless engaging seriously with the question of black rights in a post-war world at the time of his death.

There is much, *much*, that I agree with in this book, and Foner certainly raises plenty of new questions. Yet I wonder if he does not ultimately break the historiographical mould to the extent that one might have expected. This seems especially striking given that he has wiped the slate clean, in a way, by keeping out reference to existing scholarly debate.

The author's immediate jumping-off point for *The Fiery Trial* was his own contribution to *Our Lincoln* two years ago, an article on colonisation. Foner singles out that idea as something that historians tend to overlook

for the more progressive notes that Lincoln sounded at any given point in his career. In reminding us both that a politically inactive 1850s Abe had spoken up for the scheme, and that he pursued the policy into 1863, the author deftly swats aside the wishful thinking that would deem colonisation a crafty, short-term palliative for northern concerns about the effects of the Emancipation Proclamation.

Yet Foner does declare that Lincoln abandoned colonisation, and in arguing that black enlistment and demands for labour sealed its fate – and slowly forced the president to imagine a place for African-Americans in their native land – he differs from most historians largely in pushing its presumed lifespan forward to about spring 1863. In fact, Lincoln engaged in a second wave of colonisation projects throughout that summer and beyond, dealing directly with European empires – including a mission from one of the British colonies, whose failure the author pronounces prematurely – in order to bypass the questionable private speculators who had produced disasters like the Île à Vache project. In fairness, Foner does then address the possibility of Lincoln's later interest in colonisation, though only in an end-note.⁽²⁾

That may raise a broader question, though: *The Fiery Trial* is a chronologically linear account based on the idea of 'growth', and as such it would have little flexibility to incorporate these contested points, even if Foner had not made the conscious decision to avoid them. Of course, he is quick to qualify 'growth' in the introduction, whilst the (inevitable) end of the Lincoln narrative in the last chapter allows him to sound some circumspect and eminently sage notes about what might have happened next. But still, Foner *has* gone for 'growth', and not unproblematically.⁽³⁾ 'Many aspects of the slavery controversy ... were only marginally related to race' (p. 120), he argues, echoing recent remarks by Henry Louis Gates.⁽⁴⁾ In that vein, I wonder if he might have disentangled Lincoln's growth with respect to slavery, and his growth with respect to race, a bit more explicitly. I agree that Lincoln was not born ready to sign the Emancipation Proclamation, but there may be two different threads of growth running through *The Fiery Trial*: one of Lincoln coming round to a belief that the moment had come to strike against an institution that he had always hated, even if a lot of water had to flow under the bridge first, and the other a later, more novel departure of questioning his deepest racial prejudices.

Yet even for the latter, 'growth' still troubles me. This is a tricky area for us all, with the significance of the evidence that the president had reached a new stance on matters such as black suffrage by the end of the war still chafing against the simple fact that, as Foner points out, Lincoln barely addressed the question of black rights outside 1857–8. *The Fiery Trial* is not a biography, and the author has succeeded more than most in placing Lincoln in the context of the attitudes of those around him. But paradoxically, this swings back to the pre-eminence of his individual evolution when that context is one of abolitionists and persuasive African-Americans. Whilst it would be an exaggeration to call those positive influences a *deus ex machina* in the narrative, they certainly move the president on a lot between 1863 and 1865, given that Foner so rightly rejects the 'secret Lincoln' of 1862.

An analytical framework of personal growth is indeed preferable to seeing Lincoln as a masked egalitarian, but I would like to offer some thoughts that may complicate or cut across the idea, both in our interpretations and, crucially, maybe even in Lincoln's own mind. I think that Foner hit the nail on the head with a recent comment on NPR that Lincoln's colonisationist proclivities were never founded in disdain for free blacks (unlike many others'), but rather because 'white people [were] so racist that blacks [would] never be accorded equality in this country'.⁽⁵⁾ Was that not still a concern in 1865 – as Benjamin Butler alleged – with no-one knowing what would happen next, and the president having no sense that he could, or even should, interfere in the individual states' social systems? It might also reflect what Foner calls Lincoln's curious moral agnosticism in acknowledging, in his Peoria speech and the remarks to the deputation of black Washingtonians, the powerful claims of popular (i.e. democratic?) prejudice. In that case, perhaps colonisation was not really something for an individual to grow out of, but a racial safety valve, and one of several potential policy options in a world turned upside down.

Ditto Lincoln's private, later public suggestion of a limited black suffrage, which although reflective of a significant inner step, lacked political teeth as long as his understanding of the relationship between the states and federal government prevented its actual imposition anywhere. Indeed, given the president's

admission that the executive's role was due to shrink at the war's end – and the constitutional hang-ups that permeated his Reconstruction policy – perhaps the greater mental stride for him would have actually been the second one, to go from suggesting to insisting on African-American enfranchisement. As historians, we also need to stop simply reaching for the multi-layered word 'citizenship' to describe Lincoln's vision for post-war blacks, even when it is used to argue how tentative this development might have been. I was glad, then, to see Foner's summary of antebellum African-American rights echo Michael Vorenberg's recent essay in *Lincoln's Proclamation* (6) in reminding us to unpick the multiple and contested meanings of that idea.

All in all, *The Fiery Trial* provides an excellent, nuanced, and challenging account of the Great Emancipator's struggle – meant in the broadest possible way – with slavery. No uplifting moment stands unqualified by sharp, detached observation of the limitations of Lincoln's thoughts or deeds; no episode which jars with modern assumptions is placed in anything other than accurate and fair historical context. Even with some caveats about the idea of 'growth', this should be the first port of call for both the academic and the lay reader.

Sebastian Page was reviewing the US edition of The Fiery Trial

Notes

1. Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party before the Civil War* (New York, 1970); Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863–1877* (New York, 1988); *Our Lincoln: new perspectives on Lincoln and his world*, ed. Eric Foner (London, 2008).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. For an account of the 'imperial projects' and the question of the president's late colonisation interest, see P. W. Magness and S. N. Page, *Colonization after Emancipation: Lincoln and the Movement for Black Resettlement* (Columbia, MO, 2010).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Fred Kaplan and Allen Guelzo's reviews have taken issue with 'growth', the latter rather more severely. See <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/11/28/AR2010112802826.html> [2]> [accessed 6 December 2010] and <<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703556604575502871565475324.html> [3]> [accessed 6 December 2010], respectively.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. H. L. Gates Jr, *Lincoln on Race and Slavery* (Princeton, NJ, 2009), p. xx.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. <http://www.npr.org/templates/transcript/transcript.php?storyId=130489804> [4]> [accessed 6 December 2010].[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Michael Vorenberg, 'Abraham Lincoln's 'fellow citizens' – before and after emancipation', *Lincoln's Proclamation: Emancipation Reconsidered*, ed. William A. Blair and Karen Fisher Younger (Chapel Hill, NC, 2009).[Back to \(6\)](#)

Other reviews:

New York Times

<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/03/books/review/Reynolds-t.html> [5]

New Republic

<http://www.tnr.com/article/books-and-arts/magazine/81377/lincoln-slavery-fiery-trial-review> [6]

Barnes and Noble

<http://bnreview.barnesandnoble.com/t5/Reviews-Essays/The-Fiery-Trial/ba-p/3931> [7]

Progressive Reader

<http://www.progressivereader.com/> [8]

Wall Street Journal

<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703556604575502871565475324.html> [9]

Boston Globe

http://www.boston.com/ae/books/articles/2010/10/10/becoming_lincoln/ [10]

San Francisco Chronicle

<http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi> [11]

Washington Post

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/11/28/AR2010112802826.html> [2]

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[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/5227>

[2] <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/11/28/AR2010112802826.html>

[3] <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703556604575502871565475324.html>

[4] <http://www.npr.org/templates/transcript/transcript.php?storyId=130489804>

[5] <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/03/books/review/Reynolds-t.html>

[6] <http://www.tnr.com/article/books-and-arts/magazine/81377/lincoln-slavery-fiery-trial-review>

[7] <http://bnreview.barnesandnoble.com/t5/Reviews-Essays/The-Fiery-Trial/ba-p/3931>

[8] <http://www.progressivereader.com/?p=59800>

[9]

http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703556604575502871565475324.html?mod=WSJ_Books_LS_Boo

[10] http://www.boston.com/ae/books/articles/2010/10/10/becoming_lincoln/

[11] <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2010/10/24/RVDM1FRK24.DTL>