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*The cruelty and degeneracy the future president was subjected to in his youth forged his iron will*

by *Christopher Hitchens*

# Lincoln's Emancipation

IMAGE: DUNG HOANG

LINCOLN'S BICENTENNIAL has permitted us to revisit and reconsider every facet of his story and personality, from the Bismarckian big-government colossus so disliked by the traditional right and the isolationists, to the "Great Emancipator" who used to figure on the posters of the American Communist Party, to the reluctant anti-slaver so plausibly caught in Gore Vidal's finest novel. Absent from much of this consideration has been the unfashionable word *destiny*: the sense conveyed by Lincoln of a man who was somehow brought forth by the hour itself, as if his entire life had been but a preparation for that moment.

We cannot get this frisson from other great American presidents. Washington, Jefferson, Madison—these were all experienced members of the existing and indeed preexisting governing class. So was Roosevelt. However exaggerated or invented some parts of the Lincoln legend may be, it is nonetheless a fact that he came from the very loam and marrow of the new country, and that—unlike the other men I have mentioned—he cannot possibly be imagined as other than an American.

No review could do complete justice to the magnificent two-volume biography that has been so well-wrought by Michael Burlingame, but one way of paying tribute to it is to say that it introduces the elusive idea of destiny from the very start, and one means of illustrating this is to show how the earlier chapters continually prefigure, or body forth, the more momentous events that are to be dealt with in the later ones.

Before I try to demonstrate that, I would like to call attention to something that Professor Burlingame says in his Author's Note:

Many educated guesses, informed by over twenty years of research on Lincoln, appear in this biography. Each such guess might well begin with a phrase like "in all probability," or "it may well be that," or "it seems likely that." Such warnings, if inserted into the text, would prove wearisome; readers are encouraged to provide such qualifiers silently whenever the narrative explores Lincoln's unconscious motivation.

It is agreeable to be informed, when embarking on such a long and demanding work, that one will be treated like a grown-up.

There is, whether intentionally or not, a sort of biblical cadence and flavor to the way in which Burlingame relates the early family history: the grandmother Bathsheba; the father's older brother Mordecai; and Mary Lincoln's half sister, who said that "the reason why Thomas Lincoln grew up unlettered was that his brother Mordecai, having all the land in his possession

... turned Thomas out of the house when the latter was 12 years; so he went out among his relations." The story of Jacob and Esau, and of Naboth's vineyard, was surely known to the person who recounted that.

As for the social background, here is a sentence that conveys a great deal of misery in a very few words. It is Burlingame's summary of the area in which Sinking Spring farm, Kentucky, young Abraham's birthplace, was situated. "The neighborhood was thinly settled; the 36-square-mile tax district where the Lincoln farm was located contained 85 taxpayers, 44 slaves, and 392 horses." Lincoln himself said that his early life could be "condensed into a single sentence" from Gray's "Elegy": "The short and simple annals of the poor." But this would be to euphemize his true boyhood situation, which was much more like that of a serf or a domestic animal than of Gray's lowly but sturdy peasantry. To read of the unrelenting coarseness and brutality of the boy's father is lowering to the spirit, as is the shame he felt at his mother's reputation for unchastity. The wretchedness of these surroundings made Lincoln tell a later acquaintance in Illinois: "I have seen a good deal of the back side of this world." (Incidentally, one has to imagine this being said with some kind of wink and nudge: Burlingame is not content, as so many historians are, merely to hint at Lincoln's fondness for broad humor, but furnishes us with some actual examples, which are heavy on the side of scatology and flatulence.)

Lincoln's own experience of legal bondage and hard usage is very graphically told: not only did his father's improvidence deprive him of many necessities, but it resulted in his being hired out as a menial to be a hewer of wood and drawer of water for his father's rough and miserly neighbors. The law as it then stood made children the property of their father, so young Abraham was "hired out" only in the sense of chattel, since he was obliged to turn over his wages. From this, and from the many groans and sighs that are reported of the boy (who still struggled to keep reading, an activity feared and despised by his father, as it was by the owner of Frederick Douglass), we receive a prefiguration of the politician who declared in 1856, "I used to be a slave." In Lincoln's unconcealed resentment toward his male parent, we get an additional glimpse of the man who also declared, in 1858, "As I would not be a slave, so I would not be a master."

Yet the contours and character of the frontier region also fitted Lincoln for compromise: this was the area of the United States where the two systems were beginning their long, cruel attrition. Both as an aspiring congressman and as an ambitious lawyer, Lincoln managed on occasion to keep silent on the slavery issue and even, when appropriately briefed, to act as counsel for a slaveholder. Burlingame gives an intriguing account of the *Matson* case of 1847, in which, on technical procedural grounds and on the principle of "first come, first served," Lincoln agreed to represent a man who wanted some of his slaves back. On the other hand, he generally steered clear of fugitive-slave cases, "because of his unwillingness to be a party to a violation of the Fugitive Slave Law, arguing that the way to overcome the difficulty was to repeal the law." Here again, we can see the legalistic and sometimes pedantic mind that exhausted all the possibilities of compromise before coming up with the tortuous form of words that finally became the Emancipation Proclamation.

In rather the same way, Lincoln sought a deft means of negotiating the shoals of the religious question. Burlingame's highly diverting early pages show Lincoln being actively satirical in matters of faith, lampooning preachers, staging mock services, and praying to God "to put stockings on the chickens' feet in winter," in the words of his stepsister Matilda. Reminiscing about frontier Baptists many years later, he told an acquaintance: "I don't like to hear cut and dried sermons. No—when I hear a man preach, I like to see him act as if he were fighting bees!"

However, in his 1846 election campaign, Lincoln was cornered by the faithful and forced to deny that he was an "open scoffer at Christianity." His handbill on the subject is rightly criticized as too lawyerly by Burlingame, who elegantly points out:

In this document Lincoln seemed to make two different claims: that he never believed in infidel

doctrines, and that he never publicly espoused them. If the former were true, the latter would be superfluous; if the former were untrue, the latter would be irrelevant.

Several moments in the narrative—the bee-fighting preacher being one such—put me in mind of Mark Twain. The tall tales, the dry wit, the broad-gauge humor, the imminence of farce even in grave enterprises: Lincoln's inglorious participation in the Black Hawk War has many points of similarity with Twain's "Private History of a Campaign That Failed." Lincoln was once invited to referee a cockfight where a bird refused combat. Its enraged owner, one Babb McNabb, flung the creature onto a woodpile, whereat it spread its feathers and crowed mightily. "Yes, you little cuss," yelled McNabb, "you are great on dress parade, but you ain't worth a damn in a fight." Long afterward, confronted with the unmartial ditherings of General George B. McClellan, Lincoln would compare the chief of his army—and subsequent electoral challenger—to McNabb's pusillanimous rooster.

Mark Twain and Frederick Douglass, too, were persons who could only have been original Americans, sprung from American ground. It is engaging and affecting to read of Lincoln's lifelong troubles with spelling and pronunciation (he addressed himself to "Mr. Cheerman" in his famous Cooper Union Speech of 1860) and of his frequent appearance with as much as six inches of shin or arm protruding from his ill-made clothes: truly a Knight of the Sorrowful Countenance. Yet despite, or perhaps because of, the extreme harshness of his early life, he was innately opposed to any form of cruelty, and despite his lack of polish and refinement, he almost never stooped to crudity or vulgarity in political speech. Without overdrawing the contrast, Burlingame shows us a Judge Stephen Douglas who was a slave to every kind of anti-Negro demagoguery and political mendacity. And Lincoln bested him, admittedly while hedging on the race question, by constantly stressing the need to secure "to each laborer the whole product of his labor." In more modern terms, we might say that he used the language of class to neutralize racism. (I would say that the account given here of the famous debates surpasses all its predecessors.)

It has lately become fashionable to say that Lincoln was not, or was not "really," a believer in black-white equality. A thread that runs consistently through Burlingame's narrative is that of self-education on this question, to the eventual point where Lincoln came as close to an egalitarian position as made almost no difference. Even the infamous discussion about the postwar expatriation of black Americans to "colonies" in Africa or on the American isthmus was conducted, by Burlingame's account, with very strict regard on Lincoln's side for the dignity and stature of those whose fate he was discussing. And it goes almost without saying that he had already had every opportunity to see that there was nothing very "superior" about the color white. By the end, Frederick Douglass—who had often criticized him—was able to say that Lincoln was "emphatically the black man's President." And Burlingame's survey of the life and opinions of the "mad racist" John Wilkes Booth makes it equally plain that the white supremacists felt the same way. Still, even this is to understate the universalist intransigence with which Lincoln never conceded an inch of American ground, and with which he quarreled with his generals, including McClellan, for referring to the North as "our soil," when every state was still, always, and invariably to be considered a part of the Union.

It was once said that the Civil War was the last of the old wars and the first of the new: cavalry and infantry charges gave way to cannon and railways, and sail gave way to steam. It is of great interest to read Lincoln's meditations on the projected postwar expansion of the United States, with a strong emphasis on mining and manufacturing. He had completely shed the bucolic influence of his early career and was looking in the very last days of his life to renew industry and immigration. Before Gettysburg, people would say "the United States are ..." After Gettysburg, they began to say "the United States is ..." That they were able to employ the first three words at all was a tribute to the man who did more than anyone to make that hard transition himself, and then to secure it for others, and for posterity.

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