

Conclusion

Having examined Lincoln's actions and character, in this chapter I review my main conclusions, beginning with his morally controversial actions. In his role as a politician, Lincoln made many morally fraught decisions regarding slavery and the legal rights of African Americans. Some of those decisions have been the subject of considerable criticism. In practice, he was a utilitarian and would have justified his decisions and policies about those issues on utilitarian grounds. This helps explain his willingness to make compromises and pursue policies that reduced rather than ended injustices in cases in which he thought that it was not possible to completely or immediately end the injustices. Indeed, most of his actions and policies in question can be justified on utilitarian grounds. But defending those actions and policies does not require that we accept utilitarianism. Other reasonable moral principles also justify them.

These are some key examples. Despite the horrendous injustice of American slavery, Lincoln was justified in moving slowly and cautiously to end it. He did not have the power or constitutional authority to completely abolish slavery when he took office. It would have been both futile and

counterproductive for him to have declared the complete abolition of slavery at the beginning of his presidency.

His August 1862 letter to Horace Greeley might seem to show that he was morally obtuse in thinking that the abolition of slavery was only of instrumental importance compared to the goal of preserving the Union. But appearances can be misleading. We should not assume that this letter was completely candid. Given Lincoln's legitimate worries about the Supreme Court and his need for the support of the border states and of the many soldiers in the Union army who were not willing to fight to end slavery, it would have been very risky and politically inexpedient for him to say that he was fighting the war primarily to end slavery.

Lincoln cared very much about keeping the country together, perhaps too much. But he also cared greatly about the rights and welfare of the American slaves. He loathed and hated slavery and devoted his entire political career after 1854 to opposing it. His concern to keep the country together cannot be separated from his concerns about slavery. He knew and feared that an independent Confederacy would expand and prolong slavery, and after he was elected president, he was not willing to try to placate the South and preserve the Union by abandoning his policy against the further expansion of slavery.

Lincoln's rescinding of Fremont's order for partial emancipation in Missouri seems *prima facie* very wrong, because it prevented Fremont from freeing people from bondage. But this action was morally justified because allowing Fremont's order to stand would have seriously risked causing the Union to lose the war. Lincoln's slowness in issuing the Emancipation Proclamation was also justified. Those who criticize him for his actions in these cases greatly overestimate his power and discretion. He was constrained by the U.S. Constitution and the protections it provided to the institution of slavery.

He was also constrained by public opinion because he needed the support of the border states and Northern Democrats to fight and win the war. Further, Lincoln and the Union took a number of strong measures against slavery very early in the Civil War. The received view that Lincoln waited until the middle of the war to fight against slavery and then suddenly and radically altered the Union war aims by issuing the Emancipation Proclamation is quite mistaken. In fact, his policies evolved slowly and steadily throughout his entire time as president.

Lincoln is widely criticized for his support for the colonization of freed American slaves to tropical lands outside the United States, but many of these criticisms are unfair. He never endorsed the most objectionable forms of colonization involving involuntary deportation. Because of the deep and widespread opposition in the Northern states to allowing freed slaves to move to the North, it was necessary for Lincoln to use the prospect of colonization to deflect criticisms of the Emancipation Proclamation. He is rightly criticized for his dictatorial and condescending treatment of black leaders when they met to discuss colonization in August 1862. But he learned from this meeting and other evidence of black opposition to colonization, and after 1862 he never again strongly pushed for large-scale colonization. The final version of the Emancipation Proclamation makes no mention of any plans for colonizing freed slaves.

Lincoln is often criticized for suspending habeas corpus. The criticism that he greatly restricted freedom of expression and political freedom in the United States is often overstated and exaggerated.

Lincoln bears great personal responsibility for the beginning of the Civil War. He deliberately risked provoking the Confederates into attacking Fort Sumter, and he chose to fight a civil war rather than permit the Confederate states to secede peacefully. More than anyone else, he caused the

secession of the Confederate states to lead to a civil war. The CSA desired a peaceful separation from the United States.

There appears to be a strong case for saying that, when the Civil War began, the Union did not have just cause for fighting the war. It is debatable whether the good of keeping the nation together and not creating a precedent for further instances of secession in the United States and other democratic nations were enough to justify the immense evil of all the death and suffering caused by the war.

But even if we reject Lincoln's arguments about the harm that Confederate independence would have done to the cause of democracy around the world, the Union war effort was morally justified on other grounds. It would have been a moral catastrophe if the CSA had gained its independence. Had it done so, it is very probable that slavery would have continued much longer in the American South; it is also likely that slavery would have persisted longer in Latin America. Further, the legal rights that blacks would have possessed in the CSA after such time as the CSA abolished slavery would probably not have been nearly comparable to the rights they actually possessed in the United States from 1865 until the present.

Questions of *jus in bello* are also important for any moral assessment of Lincoln's actions as commander in chief. The Union military's treatment of Confederate civilians has been widely criticized, and Lincoln personally authorized and approved the Lieber Code, which permitted much harsher treatment of civilians than some important Union leaders thought proper. Many people claim that the Civil War was a "total war," which involved very harsh and ruthless treatment of Southern civilians on a very large scale. Some infamous statements by several Union generals and certain provisions of the Lieber Code lend credence to this view. But this view is quite mistaken. The number of Confederate civilians who died as a result of the actions of the Union army

was very small compared with the number of civilian deaths in other wars that are not generally regarded as total wars. Further, the independence of a powerful and militant Confederate States of America, a nation dedicated to the expansion and perpetuation of slavery, would have been a moral catastrophe. At least during the second half of the war, when the Union's "hard war" policies toward civilians began, the Civil War constituted a "supreme moral emergency" in which normally impermissible means were permissible, provided that they were necessary to win the war.

Lincoln enjoyed very good moral luck in that most of his controversial policies and decisions turned out for the best. But he did not enjoy blind moral luck. He was a remarkably farsighted and prescient leader.

In the second part of the book I assessed Lincoln's character. He possessed many important moral virtues and some, such as his kindness and magnanimity, to an extremely high degree. He was an extraordinarily good person in many important respects. Despite his many outstanding moral virtues, there are also grounds to question the goodness of his character. Many fault him as a husband, father, and son. But, on balance, his character cannot be faulted greatly on account of his personal life.

Lincoln had a remarkable sense of humor that endeared him to those who knew him. But as a young man he often took it too far and engaged in pranks and mockery that were hurtful to others.

Probably the most serious criticism of his character is the charge that he was a racist. Many of his statements and actions concerning racial issues look very bad in retrospect. Lincoln supported very unjust racial discrimination, spoke disrespectfully of blacks and people of mixed race, and frequently pandered to the deep racial prejudices of Illinois voters. Despite all of this, he was never a racist in any sense

of the term in which being a racist is a grave moral failing. His racist attitudes were mixed with extremely virtuous benevolence for the same people who were the objects of his racist attitudes. In addition, he deserves considerable credit for largely overcoming the racial prejudices of his time and place by the end of his life. He had very bad moral luck in that he lived in a time and place in which extreme racial prejudice was almost universal among whites. His racism did not detract *greatly* from the goodness of his other moral virtues.

He was, on balance, a very good and morally virtuous person. Indeed, he was a morally exemplary human being.¹ Lincoln deserves the great admiration he has received, and in most respects, he is worthy of emulation.

Some of his virtues, such as his kindness and compassion, were prominent very early in his life. But as a young man, he had many rough edges and faults to overcome. An important part of the story of his life is his capacity for self-improvement, learning from his mistakes, and learning from the criticisms of others. Throughout his life, he worked hard at and succeeded in becoming a better person. He evolved from being a partisan politician who mocked and personally attacked his political opponents in speeches and anonymous newspaper articles to become a great statesman who was fair to his opponents and respectful of them. He changed from being a defender of many of Illinois's infamous black laws to being an abolitionist. As president, he adopted more and more enlightened views and policies regarding African Americans and their place in American society.

Lincoln was an extremely ambitious man. His ambition drove his remarkable self-education and rise from extreme

¹ See Linda Zagzebski's *Divine Motivation Theory* for a defense of the idea that we should define fundamental moral concepts such as right and wrong and good and bad in terms of morally exemplary people.

poverty to prominence as a lawyer and politician. Ambition is often a vice, but his ambition was honorable and virtuous because he sought to gain fame and the esteem of his fellow humans by doing good and making himself worthy of the esteem of others. In his rise in the world, he overcame a number of great personal tragedies and sorrows. He also overcame several bouts of severe depression.

Lincoln's virtues helped him to be a great political and military leader. His extraordinary magnanimity enabled him to learn and profit from the criticisms of the abolitionists, even though they were often very unfair and bigoted in their criticisms of him. He was an extraordinarily brilliant and prescient politician with a remarkable sense of timing. He preserved the United States and helped abolish slavery despite the fact that only a small minority of Americans were abolitionists at the beginning of the Civil War. He was a superb war leader. He made a great number of difficult and important decisions about the war and slavery under tremendous stress and pressure. The great majority of his important decisions were the correct ones, both morally and strategically. He handled some things exactly right, most notably, the Fort Sumter crisis, the cases of Fremont and Hunter, the Emancipation Proclamation, and transforming public opinion in the North and most of the border states to support the complete abolition of slavery. In the words of Frederick Douglass, "infinite wisdom has seldom sent any man into the world better fitted for his mission than Abraham Lincoln."²

The mythical Lincoln described to American elementary schoolchildren was without flaw – at least the flaws were never mentioned. Yet he was not without flaws, and we need to give a full accounting of them. Such a full accounting requires us to acknowledge his support for many aspects

² "Oration in Memory of Lincoln at the Dedication of the Freedman's Monument," p. 437.

of Illinois's deplorable black codes, his silence about other provisions of those codes, his slowness in becoming an abolitionist, and his failure to ever publicly support equal social-political rights for blacks. A full accounting also requires us to admit his very cold and troubled relationship with his father and his failure to introduce his father and stepmother to his family, his rough and sometimes hurtful sense of humor, his very troubled marriage, and the grounds for criticizing him as a husband and father.

But the Lincoln myth also omits many of the difficulties and moral hazards of his life and his bad moral luck. It leaves out many of the details of his struggle to become a good and honorable man. The myth omits the terrible prejudices of his family, the extreme racial prejudices of Illinois voters, and the prejudices of almost all of his close associates before he became president. The myth does not give the details of the intense stresses of his life, including his crushing workload as president when he was assisted by a tiny White House staff that included only two personal secretaries. His duties as president were made much more difficult by the disloyalty of General McClellan and Treasury Secretary Chase, the extremely harsh and vicious criticisms that assailed him from all sides, the personal tragedy of the death of his beloved son Willie, and the tragedy of his marriage to a very difficult and very troubled woman. Lincoln achieved the things he did under extraordinarily difficult and stressful circumstances.

The real Abraham Lincoln was as good a person as the mythical Lincoln, but also more complex, more interesting, and more human as well. In this conclusion, I follow W. E. B. Du Bois. Du Bois mentions Lincoln's defects and quotes the most objectionable passages of Lincoln's opening statement at the Charleston debate. Nonetheless he calls Lincoln a "great and good man" and stresses his capacity for growth and improvement. Du Bois writes,

[I] love him not because he was perfect but because he was not and triumphed . . . The world is full of folk whose taste was educated in the gutter. The world is full of people born hating and despising their fellows. To them I love to say: See this man. He was one of you yet he became Abraham Lincoln. I personally revere him the more because up out of his contradictions and inconsistencies he fought his way to the pinnacles of earth and the fight was within as well as without.

The scars and foibles and contradictions of the Great do not diminish but enhance the meaning of their upward struggle . . . it was his true history and antecedents that proved Abraham Lincoln a Prince of men.³

³ W. E. B. Du Bois, from *The Crisis*, September 1922, in Holzer, ed., *The Lincoln Anthology*, pp. 436–7.