

Review Essay

Expanding the Definition of Freedom

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Christian G. Samito. *Lincoln and the Thirteenth Amendment*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2015. Pp. 171.

Jason H. Silverman. *Lincoln and the Immigrant*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2015. Pp. 159.

The editor's decision to place these volumes from the Concise Lincoln Library series together for review is an appropriate one. For too long many studies of the Civil War era have examined issues of race and ethnicity purely in black-and-white terms. This focus is understandable, of course, in that the enslavement of millions of African Americans was central to the conflict itself. Yet examining racial identity in a broader fashion is key to understanding the expanding definition of freedom connected to citizenship in the whole era. Christian Samito has already used this method profitably in his *Becoming American under Fire* (Cornell University Press, 2009), which highlights the Civil War struggles of Irish immigrant and African American soldiers to be accorded the full benefits of citizenship through their military service in the Union Army. Though not totally successful in achieving those benefits, especially in the case of black soldiers, the service of both groups did expand legal definitions of citizenship both within and outside the United States.

As with so many other facets of the war, Abraham Lincoln personified the evolution of thought that many Americans had on issues of slavery, race, ethnicity, and citizenship. Samito begins his work by examining honestly the conservative nature of Lincoln's attitude toward slavery where it existed. Lincoln's Whiggish reverence for the Constitution, coupled with his lawyerly flexibility to find mutually beneficial settlements trumped his moral opposition to slavery in itself. Yet this flexibility of principle left him open to persuasion on changing the Constitution. Samito describes well how Lincoln came to at least accept the idea of amending the Constitution, to protect slavery in the states, if it meant saving the Union in 1861. The author

correctly surmises that Lincoln displayed this willingness to adapt because he knew that the amendments proposed under the so-called Crittenden Compromise never had a chance of passage in Congress. Nonetheless, the genie was out of the lamp, as the new president had at least considered constitutional amendments to solve the sectional crisis.

Samito then goes over more familiar ground in explaining Lincoln's movement toward the Emancipation Proclamation in 1861 and 1862. He correctly emphasizes the often forgotten proposals for a series of constitutional amendments that Lincoln, somewhat constitutionally queasy about the Proclamation, considered in December 1862. The next four chapters, though, are the strongest in the book, as they take us through the complicated process of introducing, passing, and ratifying the Thirteenth Amendment. Too often those of us who teach the Civil War spend a long time going over the move toward the Proclamation and then almost presume the Thirteenth Amendment a fait accompli. These chapters help disavow that idea. Particularly strong on the congressional maneuvering, which was the focus of Stephen Spielberg's motion picture *Lincoln* (2012), Samito indicates how much work the president, and especially William Henry Seward, did to get the required two-thirds majority in the House of Representatives. Indeed, it would have been useful for movie-goers to have Samito's work on hand to help explain the intricacies of what they were seeing on the screen. The book concludes with a solid assessment of the amendment's meaning for America, beyond the obvious banning of chattel slavery. It established the idea of the Federal government as a protector of, and not just a threat to, constitutional liberties. It redefined the original meaning of American liberty and fulfilled, as Samito sees it, Lincoln's vision "of a country unified in free labor economics and the ideals of the Declaration of Independence at the core of its nationalism" (125).

The Declaration of Independence and its promise of "Liberty" for "all men" lies at the center of Jason H. Silverman's work too. *Lincoln and the Immigrant* explores a less-well-covered topic, the ambiguities in Lincoln's public attitude toward immigrants. Privately, Lincoln seemed to have good relationships with individual immigrants. Silverman chronicles these affiliations well and highlights their impact on Lincoln's politics. Lincoln's connections with Illinois Germans, for example, proved useful to his nascent career in the Republican Party. He came to admire the hard work and liberal values of German Americans and never had a doubt about their patriotism. The Irish he was more ambivalent about, but again, Silverman shows that on a

personal level he could warm to the Irish and defend their reputation to fellow natives.

On a public level though, Lincoln's courting of Know-Nothings to transfer their support to the Republicans was more problematic. As with his dislike of slavery, political necessity often led to compromise, or more accurately, the putting aside of principles to further the larger cause. As Silverman puts it, "Lincoln was far too clever a politician to publicly repudiate the old Know-Nothing votes at such a crucial time when every vote counted," but "he had to protect the immigrant vote under all circumstances" (18). This balancing act shifted according to events. Thus, in the mid-1850s, the nativist vote was more important, but in 1860 the immigrant one held sway. During the 1860 election, for example, Lincoln worked strenuously to keep an anti-immigrant plank out of the Republican Party platform. As a result, many immigrant Republicans shifted their support to him when their original choice, the long-time pro-immigrant William Henry Seward, failed to win the nomination outright on the first ballot.

During the war, President Lincoln continued to court immigrant support. He extended Federal positions to naturalized citizens and encouraged the recruitment of ethnic units in the army. He made some errors, unavoidable in trying to balance all of the patronage needs of a 19th-century American party, but was open to correcting those mistakes. More significant, Lincoln established a closer relationship with Irish Americans. His alliance with Archbishop John Hughes developed early in the conflict after Hughes displayed strong support for the Union and its war effort. To embrace a Roman Catholic cleric, who for many natives was the epitome of the dangerous Irish immigrant priest with influence over hundreds of thousands of Roman Catholics, indicates how far Lincoln had moved from his position of not offending nativists in the 1850s. He even sent Hughes on a diplomatic mission to promote nonintervention among the Roman Catholic powers of Europe. Though Silverman correctly points out that the Irish predominantly remained Democrats, in large part because of their opposition to the Emancipation Proclamation, some Irish converted to the new cause for freedom.

Overall, Silverman covers the topic well, though he should have examined the controversies around illegal U.S. enlistment of foreign citizens. A lot of the administration's good work with immigrants was undermined by the *Finney* and *Kearsarge* cases, for example, the former named for a Federal recruiting agent and Irish immigrant, Patrick Finney, who returned to Ireland and recruited new migrants with a promise of civilian work but instead enlisted them in the U.S. Army;

and the latter involving a U.S. Navy vessel that illegally recruited while at port in Ireland. Both cases caused serious tensions between the U.K. and U.S. governments, as did the forcing of foreign nationals into the U.S. military through conscription in America.

This omission is minor, however, as Silverman's aim to showcase Lincoln's ability to adapt and change over time, but remain rooted in the principle, is achieved here. Lincoln stayed close to the liberal ideology of the Declaration of Independence. As a result, he "made it clear that unless the Declaration is read as an instrument of inclusion, the ideals of the [American] Revolution are rendered as empty words" (122). Nationalist that he was, he still recognized and embraced the universal nature of the Declaration and its promise of liberty for all, not just those descended from the original British settlers.

Lincoln's methods of breathing new life into the Declaration, however, could be described as Machiavellian. Many Lincoln admirers, including the authors reviewed here, seem reluctant to acknowledge this reality. Silverman, for example, quickly excuses Lincoln's courting of nativists, and Samito dismisses too easily the claims that votes for the Thirteenth Amendment were bought and paid for with a special slush fund. Both, then, give the Great Emancipator the benefit of the doubt in all controversies. Of course in today's political and media climate, Lincoln would be charged with the cardinal sin of hypocrisy. Yet both these works highlight that new definitions of freedom cannot be achieved without political power, and Lincoln, whatever his motivations and influences, knew how to capture and maintain that control in the American republic. Only with power could principles be implemented on a national level and, ultimately, a revolutionary scale. The influence of this "new birth of freedom," as Lincoln described it in the Gettysburg Address, beyond the United States may have been overrated by both him and subsequent scholars, but the message he gave is one that should resonate in the current domestic political climate. Lincoln expanded freedom, while there are politicians currently seeking to restrict it. Thus, for example, some of those supposedly born "equal" in the United States are now described as "anchor babies," and the rights of certain citizens are to be restricted on the basis of ethnicity or religious belief, or both. Perhaps, then, there is a need for another reemphasizing of the Declaration of Independence and its expansive definition of freedom 150 years after Lincoln did so with such success.