

Review Essay

Extending the Hand of Democracy

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Jonathan W. White. *A House Built by Slaves: African American Visitors to the Lincoln White House*. Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2022. Pp. 288.

Jonathan W. White, ed. *To Address You as My Friend: African Americans' Letters to Abraham Lincoln*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2021. Pp. 304.

Diana Schaub. *His Greatest Speeches: How Lincoln Moved the Nation*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2021. Pp. 224.

Abraham Lincoln has not received a pass on race in recent years. In 2000, Lerone Bennett, Jr.'s *Forced into Glory: Abraham Lincoln's White Dream* portrayed Lincoln as an emblem of American white supremacy who desired the colonization of free blacks outside of America. Bennett's intellectual heirs have continued down the same path. In 2019, Nikole Hannah-Jones emphasized Lincoln's racism and support for colonization as part of her broader critique of American democracy in the 1619 Project. Lincoln, she wrote, "believed that free black people were a 'troublesome presence' incompatible with a democracy intended only for white people." Hannah-Jones highlighted his well-known meeting on August 14, 1862, at the White House with five leaders of Washington's black community, whom he urged to promote colonization. She claimed that Lincoln expected most blacks to desire colonization—an assertion directly contradicted by the notes of the meeting published in the *New York Tribune*—and contended that the freedpeople proved Lincoln wrong during Reconstruction: rather than being incompatible with American democracy, they made it democratic. They "zealously engaged with the democratic process," led the movement for civil rights at both the state and national levels, and brought a "multiracial democracy" within view—until white racism

brought Reconstruction crashing down. “Anti-black racism runs in the very DNA of this country,” she concluded, “as does the belief, so well articulated by Lincoln, that black people are the obstacle to national unity.”¹ The picture Bennett and Hannah-Jones painted of Lincoln and American democracy is not pretty. But is it true?

Jonathan W. White portrays a radically different Lincoln in *A House Built by Slaves: African American Visitors to the Lincoln White House*. Chronicling the experience of black visitors to Lincoln’s White House, White contends that it became “a site of significant transformations in the history of race in America” (xiii). Lincoln’s welcoming of many black visitors—unprecedented in the history of American politics—made Lincoln’s White House a powerful example of “racial egalitarianism” (xviii). Notably, Lincoln invited blacks into his home for social in addition to political visits, a remarkable break from characteristic social norms. When black visitors arrived, he warmly shook their hands, a seemingly inconsequential welcome, but one highly unusual at the time. But his egalitarianism reached beyond the length of his arm. Black children were a regular presence at the White House, playing with Willie and Tad; black people attended White House receptions; and, with Lincoln’s permission, black organizations used the White House grounds for fundraisers. All of this engendered anxiety and anger amongst northern Democrats, who denounced these inversions of racial norms. Breaking the norms was a decided political risk. Lincoln did it anyway.²

The book reveals a changing America. In Lincoln’s first annual message to Congress, he asked Congress to support diplomatic recognition of Haiti and Liberia. Welcomed by Lincoln, Haiti’s black diplomat turned heads when he arrived. A woman who met him at a dinner party said she “felt queerly, as though I were having a very funny dream” (55). She would not be the only American to experience such

1. Nikole Hannah-Jones, “Our democracy’s founding ideals were false when they were written. Black Americans have fought to make them true,” *New York Times*, August 14, 2019, accessed March 3, 2022. Hannah-Jones has updated her essay in the book-length version of the project. She has altered the DNA quotation, but her interpretation of Lincoln remains substantially the same. See Nikole Hannah-Jones, Caitlin Roper, Ilena Silverman, and Jake Silverstein, eds., *The 1619 Project* (New York: One World, 2021), 22–30. Hannah-Jones’s footnotes reveal that she misattributes the phrase “troublesome presence” and radically misinterprets its meaning. For the notes of the meeting on colonization, see Roy Basler et al., eds., *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, for the Abraham Lincoln Association, 1953–55), v. 5:370–75.

2. For a very similar portrait of Lincoln, see Michael Burlingame, *The Black Man’s President: Abraham Lincoln, African Americans, & the Pursuit of Racial Equality* (New York and London: Pegasus Books, 2021).

dreams in Lincoln's White House. On January 1, 1864, the first anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation, four black men arrived at the New Year's reception in the White House. They were not turned away. One of them told a black audience later that night that "the President received him as one gentleman ought to receive another" (72). Shortly thereafter, two black Army surgeons arrived uninvited at the White House's weekly levee. Lincoln welcomed them. When they toured the East Room, walking amidst many dignitaries, whites were thunderstruck. Lincoln's secretary William O. Stoddard wrote later that "It was a practical assertion of negro citizenship, for which few were prepared" (83). Nine months later, after Lincoln's reelection, the many black people who could not visit him in the White House serenaded him just outside. It was now their house, too. Strikingly, they made up about a third of the audience (141).

Democrats were the least prepared for these changes. Throughout Lincoln's presidency, they bitterly fulminated against his willful broaching of racial lines (see 44–45, 54, 73, 83–84, 110–11, 139–40). "Are not such scenes at the White House disgusting?" asked the *Illinois State Register* in a characteristic bromide. "When will the white people of this country awake to the sense of shame that the dominant party is bringing upon us by the practical establishment of the social equality of the negro?" (155). Historians will not be surprised to read about anti-black racism in the Democratic Party. If Democrats had been in charge, not much would have changed. But Republicans held the reins, and throughout the Civil War and Reconstruction Lincoln's party used its power to treat black people with greater decency—most notably but not only through emancipation—and eventually invested them with unprecedented rights. Lincoln helped lead the way.

He did so in part because he listened to his black visitors. For instance, Lincoln met with E. Arnold Bertonneau and John Baptiste Roudanez, free black leaders from New Orleans, on at least one and possibly two occasions in early March 1864. They introduced themselves and presented a petition signed by about 1,000 free black men in New Orleans who wanted to vote. In addition to providing Bertonneau and Roudanez with helpful advice, Lincoln soon sent a private letter asking the governor of Louisiana to consider enfranchising "some of the colored people . . . for instance, the very intelligent, and especially those who have fought gallantly in our ranks" (92). No president had ever made any such suggestion. Equally remarkably, Lincoln observed that black voters in future "would probably help" to "keep the jewel of liberty within the family of freedom" (92). Such a sentiment testified to his expectation that black people would rise

successfully from slavery in America. In keeping with such views, a year later, on April 11, 1865, Lincoln was also the first president to advocate publicly for black voting rights. For that unprecedented step toward a multiracial democracy, John Wilkes Booth assassinated him.

Lincoln listened attentively to abolitionist Frederick Douglass as well. In their second meeting, on August 19, 1864, Lincoln requested Douglass's advice about whether to publish an important letter about negotiating with the Confederates. Douglass emphatically urged him to pocket the letter. He did. The two men then spoke extensively about a plan to free as many slaves as possible should Lincoln lose the upcoming election. Union military triumphs soon made the plan unnecessary, but Lincoln's respect for Douglass's leadership and desire to collaborate in service of emancipation were abundantly evident. No longer did Douglass doubt Lincoln's commitment to destroying slavery. Moreover, Douglass was no less amazed than Democrats by the president's color-blindness. "He treated me as a man; he did not let me feel for a moment that there was any difference in the color of our skins!" exclaimed Douglass. "The President is a most remarkable man" (133–36).

Many other black Americans felt the same way. In *To Address You as My Friend: African Americans' Letters to Abraham Lincoln*, White reveals the deep connection forged between black Americans and Lincoln during the Civil War. The connection pulses from the pages of the more than 120 letters White has ferreted from the archives and meticulously edited.³ Black Americans saw Lincoln as their protector, an ally to whom they could appeal for succor. They wrote to him for countless reasons, often in ungrammatical but heartfelt language, and usually to get something they wanted. They requested pardons, debated colonization, solicited military service, protested military pay, petitioned military discharge, requested executive clemency, asked for equal treatment, begged financial assistance, and sought economic opportunities. Overwhelmingly, they saw him as their friend.

A profound conviction in his goodwill and concern for the oppressed shine through their letters. "My Dear and Worthy Friend," wrote a soldier requesting his monthly pay in August 1864, "I thake this oppertunity of interducing myself to you By wrteing thes fiew Limes To let you know that you have Proven A friend to me and to all our Race" (101–2). Three months later, Richard Brumbey related election

3. White sifted through thousands of documents in the National Archives and Library of Congress to find the letters. Fourteen were previously published in the Freedmen and Southern Society Project (xxi–xxii).

news about fellow soldier George W. Jackson, whose “captin sayed he went by his tent one munday night and he was prayin at 2 clock in the night for you to bee Relected for a 3 hours and it wakened all at the Campe wher he was he did not stope the next morning” (129–30). Freedpeople on the South Carolina Sea Islands petitioning Lincoln to purchase their own land expressed similar sentiments of gratitude in March 1864. “For what wee have received from God, through you, wee will attempt to thank you,” they wrote, “wee can only bow our selves, and with silent lips feel our utter inability to say one word, the semblance of thanks” (208–9). Perhaps this reviewer’s favorite letter is the one sent by George Washington in March 1865. “I take this opportunity this holy Sabbath day to try to express my gratitude and love to you,” Washington wrote to Lincoln through his amanuensis, Mrs. Luther Fowler. “I desire to render you a thousand thanks that you have brought us from the yoke of bondage. . . . I have lain awake four nights and my mind so bore upon you that I could not rest till I sent you a letter” (232). In a postscript, Fowler informed Lincoln that she wrote the letter “precisely as dictated” from a “colored man who came to me in a flood of tears.” She added that his sentiments were “entirely expressive of the feelings of all ‘Freedmen’” (233). The letter is moving to read now; it must have been even more moving to its recipient. Lincoln read only a fraction of all letters sent to him, including those from African Americans, but he read this one, and filed it in his personal collection.

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Diana Schaub’s *His Greatest Speeches: How Lincoln Moved the Nation* helps us understand Lincoln’s kind treatment of black people, progressive racial views, and efforts to create a multiracial democracy. The book is a commentary on three addresses: the Lyceum Address in 1838, the Gettysburg Address in 1863, and the Second Inaugural in 1865. Schaub argues that in those speeches “Lincoln conceptualized the meaning of America over time,” and she takes us through each text, line by line, to show how he attempted to redeem the nation’s integrity by realizing its founding promises of equality (xi). Notable in her method is her ability to interpret Lincoln’s language through the prism of the Scriptures, Lincoln’s many other words, the country’s founding documents, and an impressive array of other political thinkers, such as George Washington, Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, Martin Van Buren, Frederick Douglass, and Winston Churchill. Reading the book is like an excursion into a complex layering of political thought, with Schaub as a guide who continually points

out fascinating and intriguing features of Lincoln's ideas, especially his extensive use of Christian tropes and language.⁴

Schaub's object is Lincoln's redemptive nationalism. In the Lyceum Address, he focused on 1787 and the Constitution. Appalled by mobs that threatened American democracy, Lincoln urged his listeners to adopt a "sound morality" and a "reverence" for the laws in order to perpetuate the Constitution (56, 180). Unfortunately, this prescription did not prevent the Civil War. Justifying its carnage caused Lincoln to meditate on the nation's first principles. At Gettysburg, Lincoln turned his attention to 1776 and the Declaration of Independence. Speaking on "consecrated" ground, with the war dead under his feet, Lincoln urged Americans to "take increased devotion" to the founding ideas of equality and freedom (60–61). In the Second Inaugural, Lincoln had yet greater work to do: unifying the nation in the wake of the war. He accomplished it with a theological interpretation of the American Civil War that stretched back to 1619 and the first arrival of Africans in the English colonies. Lincoln invoked a "Living God" who repaid blood "drawn with the lash" with blood "drawn with the sword," and whose mercy required Americans to bind up "the nation's wounds" (112–13, 155–65). To Lincoln, "malice toward none" and "charity for all" meant reaching out to blacks as well as whites to create "a just, and a lasting peace" (113). Far from expressing hostility to black people, Lincoln urged fellow Americans to receive them wholly into the nation as human beings. To Schaub, the speech was his greatest effort to recover "the nation's integrity, re-conjoining word and deed, promise and performance." Indeed, his "spirit of reparative atonement without animus or malice" makes it "the original and better 1619 Project" (x, 110). Whether her readers will agree with that verdict remains to be seen, but one thing is sure. Americans would do well to take inspiration and instruction from Lincoln's vision for our society.

4. Unfortunately, Schaub, a political scientist, provides few footnotes to other scholars, which makes it very difficult to trace the influence of their work on her ideas. Her decision to do this seems ungenerous because it is evident that she has read widely. Many scholars could be cited, first among them Mark Noll.