

Review

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Michael Burlingame, *The Black Man's President: Abraham Lincoln, African Americans, and the Pursuit of Racial Equality*. New York: Pegasus Books, 2021. Pp. 313.

Michael Burlingame's study of Lincoln's relations with African Americans is very important. It is the latest contribution to a long-running controversy that will never come to an end because of different *instincts*. On the one side of the controversy are those who get the *feeling* that Lincoln viewed blacks as his equals. On the other side are people who tend to believe the reverse.

Make no mistake: This is largely a matter of visceral *feelings* that color one's interpretation of evidence. Lincoln made statements now and then that *sound* racist. And he also embraced—if only for a time—a policy that some regard as racist (though others do not): the voluntary “colonization” of former slaves in other countries.

Those who conclude on the basis of such evidence that Lincoln was indeed a racist are people who decline to probe further. Because their instincts tell them not to.

On the other side of the controversy are people like Michael Burlingame and myself: people who do probe further.

We do it because the evidence that Lincoln was a racist is contradicted by a huge amount of other evidence. Our instincts tell us that such evidence deserves to be considered.

Why?

Because when viewed in the largest perspective it leads to the only conclusions that make sense to us.

The most important contribution of Burlingame's book to this controversy is the amount of research he has conducted into Lincoln's documented interactions with African Americans. As always, Burlingame's scholarship is meticulous, vigorous, and based overwhelmingly in primary sources, many of which have escaped the attention of other scholars.

No other book has achieved this extraordinary scope in revealing Lincoln's interactions with blacks, as recorded by participants. The cumulative effect of Burlingame's presentation is overpowering.

It shows that Lincoln went out of his way to treat blacks with friendliness and kindness, and that he worked almost constantly in his presidential years to elevate their status and increase the range of their freedom.

So, what makes the most sense is that Lincoln made racist-sounding statements (sometimes) to deflect the opposition of the *true* white supremacists who suspected correctly that he championed racial equality. Lincoln had to out-manuever these people because of the political realities. White supremacy was the dominant conviction in American politics. Defying it openly could be fatal. Thus, Lincoln compromised now and then by saying some things that were in fact misleading—things that did not reflect his true feelings and were not backed up by his *actions*.

He employed deceptions when he felt that they were strategic necessities.

Those who subscribe to the Lincoln-the-racist hypothesis have no desire to consider such possibilities. The massive amount of evidence that Burlingame has unearthed will make no impression upon them. None at all.

And so the controversy will continue.

Those who believe that Lincoln was a racist will continue to believe their own evidence. Those of us who believe the reverse will continue to believe in *our* evidence.

Who is right?

In all likelihood, *we* are the ones who are right, because the evidence and the logic on our side of the controversy make far more sense—they *explain* things better—as Burlingame's book makes very clear.

But the evidence and logic will make no impression at all upon the minds of our opponents—minds that are completely closed.