



A . N . Z . A . S . A

---

## Our Shrinking Lincoln

Author(s): Peter S. Field

Source: *Australasian Journal of American Studies*, JULY 2021, Vol. 40, No. 1 (JULY 2021), pp. 33-48

Published by: Australia New Zealand American Studies Association

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/27041169>

### REFERENCES

Linked references are available on JSTOR for this article:

[https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/27041169?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#references\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/27041169?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#references_tab_contents)

You may need to log in to JSTOR to access the linked references.

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

Australia New Zealand American Studies Association is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Australasian Journal of American Studies*

# Our Shrinking Lincoln

## The Sixteenth President and the “Meaning of America”

*Peter S. Field*

abstract ★ For two generations, no person figured more prominently in the imagined community of American Studies’ master narrative than Abraham Lincoln. Things have changed. Today we find ourselves struggling to admire or even show much interest in Lincoln. This essay offers some analysis and explanation for how, in the domain of American Studies, Lincoln has become merely an old man captive to his times, to his class, to his gender, and, as Friedrich Nietzsche observed, to the “racial scabies” of his heart.

It seems increasingly challenging for us to admire Abraham Lincoln. By us, I mean the membership of the American Studies Association. The professionals and amateurs who comprise the ASA, both the Australasian affiliate and the North American mothership, seem to have lost their admiration for and interest in Lincoln. At the time of the ASA’s inception two generations ago, the thirteenth president claimed a central place in the American firmament and seemed a classic figure for the emerging American studies, precisely because of his standing across history, literature, politics and African American studies. Two generations later, he has virtually disappeared, at least if the presentations delivered at our annual, or biennial, conventions are any indication of his stature. My analysis of the shrinking Lincoln in this essay seeks to explain his eclipse.

The conspicuous disappearance of Lincoln among professionals contrasts sharply with the public perception. Today’s history enthusiasts

follow generations of amateur Americanists who considered Lincoln to be the greatest American president and, together with George Washington, one of the two most important public figures in the American pantheon. Lincoln today remains among the most recognized and venerated Americans in the four-hundred years or so since the settlement at Jamestown. Six million tourists annually pay homage by visiting the Lincoln memorial in Washington, DC, admiring Daniel Chester French's imposing marble likeness while reading the noble words of the Gettysburg Address and the Second Inaugural Address.

Not to be outdone, the National Park Service over the course of the last decade has transformed Gettysburg, Philadelphia, once a rural backwater, into something resembling a Disney amusement park. The words of his world-famous Address play on a loop throughout a massive visitor center surrounded by a vast wasteland of parking spaces. The town's chamber of commerce has also kept pace. Gettysburg's enterprising businesses have faithfully devoted themselves to providing any number of specialized attractions, from ubiquitous guided tours to adventure trips and metal detector excursions. Neighbourhood stores hawk everything Lincoln-related to an eager cross-section of the American public hungry for Lincoln lore. "Commercially," Yale University's David Blight recently observed, "the Lincoln image has never been more popular." And never more so than in the backwaters of Pennsylvania. Gettysburg has transformed an American Civil War battleground into an adventure park.<sup>1</sup>

Hollywood has joined the public celebration. Who among us was not impressed with Stephen Spielberg and Daniel Day-Lewis's 2012 blockbuster? The film grossed upwards of US\$300 million and garnered enormous critical acclaim. Day-Lewis's dramatic portrayal of the president elicited rave reviews and earned the much-decorated actor an Academy Award, the highest honour bestowed in the profession, while the film, writers, and director received multiple nominations. Eighty years on, Spielberg has supplanted Carl Sandberg in cementing Lincoln's place in American popular culture. By no means, it seems, has the average American turned on Old Abe. Rather, Lincoln lingers.

Past and present historians largely concur. Long-time Columbia historian Eric Foner, winner of the "history trifecta" for his 2010 book *The Fiery Trial*, playfully referred to the superfluity of "Abrahamic"

studies as the “Lincoln industrial complex.”<sup>2</sup> Like all vital industries, the Lincoln industrial complex meets its annual production quota, delivering monographs and journal articles that explicate every aspect of the sixteenth president’s life and times. Library shelves groan under the weight of the tomes, the weightiest of which seems to be Michael Burlingame’s two-volume 2200-page biography. Not that scholars agree on all aspects of the man. Beyond his centrality in the American story, scholarly opinion divides on almost every Lincoln theme from genealogy to assassination. We are today still uncertain of his maternity; perhaps Abe was illegitimate. Following Thomas Herndon, many studies offer up a Lincoln who loathed his wife, “the hellcat,” as John Hay dubbed her; others take a far more sympathetic approach to a romantic, if difficult relationship, in which Lincoln clearly and intimately loved his wife. Still others claim that he was a homosexual, who shared more than a bed with Joshua Speed. More controversially, scholars split on Lincoln and race. For some, he was an inveterate racist, whose words at Charleston prove, in Nietzsche’s words, “the racial scabies” of his heart. For others, Lincoln always loathed slavery, was an ally of the abolitionists, and understood himself to be a kindred spirit with the enslaved insofar as he was bound to labour for his overbearing father. He reproached the abolitionists in some scholarship and embraced them in others. He sought colonization or always had emancipation in mind. As president, the scholars are equally divided: he worshiped the Constitution or acted the autocrat and ran roughshod over it. The only agreement seems to be that Lincoln was indeed a vampire slayer.

Past masters and public acclaim are one thing. American Studies is another. “Our Shrinking Lincoln” offers as its central claim that among us, at the 2019 ANZASA conference and in the larger Studies that we represent, the Great Emancipator struggles to be rated very highly if at all. It seems unmistakable that Lincoln’s reputation has diminished. We may well recollect his birthday (though it was never made a national holiday) and his likeness still graces both American banknote and coin. Yet it seems that when we do take note of Lincoln, we are likely to be far more critical, if not disparaging, of him than either non-specialists or past generations of the American Studies guild. It is not difficult to test ourselves. For example, who among us is more apt to assign undergraduates the

opening of the debate with Stephen Douglas at Charleston, with the line “I as much as any other man am in favour of having the superior position assigned to the white race,” than we would the ringing nostrums of a “new birth of freedom” of the Gettysburg Address. Are we not more likely to interpret the Second Inaugural’s lines “ferverently do we hope and fondly do we pray?” not as a conciliatory gesture so much as a capitulation to an unrepentant South? Who in American Studies ever speaks of the “great emancipator” if not in scare quotes? The evidence seems clear. Few of us laud Lincoln in the manner of past generations.

Quantitative analysis confirms the merely notional. Consider the following data set. The twelve years preceding the most recent ANZASA meeting has included six conferences featuring several hundreds of panels and plenaries and keynotes delivered by the field’s eminent and emerging scholars. Lincoln has been the showcased subject exactly once over that period (by this author in Sydney in 2017). For context, in the same dozen years, ANZASA scholars have delivered scores of papers on cognate subjects, including slavery, antebellum America, the Civil War, Reconstruction, and race and racism. Yet not a single conference paper on the sixteenth president shows up in the programs. Old Abe even failed to make the cut on two panels devoted specifically to the American presidency. Among us, Lincoln languishes.<sup>3</sup>

How about presentations at the mothership, the annual American-based ASA convention? The six meetings preceding the COVID-19 outbreak featured upwards of 1,800 sessions. Among the titles of the 3,500 papers on offer, “Lincoln” appears an astonishingly meagre total of four times. Upon closer consideration, these few offerings prove less than meets the eye. Their various subjects are not the thirteenth US president, but instead examinations of Chicago’s Lincoln Park, the twentieth-century “Party of Lincoln,” the Lincoln Memorial and, finally, Scoop McCloud’s futuristic comic book *The New Adventures of Abraham Lincoln*. At the American Studies Association, it seems, Old Abe is not shrinking. Lincoln is lost.<sup>4</sup>

Could contemporary American politics have a role to play? E. H. Carr long ago defined history as “an unending dialogue between the past and the present.”<sup>5</sup> Is Lincoln’s diminution the result of the late malady known as Trump Derangement Syndrome? Consider the 1863 observations of

Ralph Waldo Emerson, hardly a Lincoln enthusiast. "You cannot refine Mr. Lincoln's taste, extend his horizon, or clear his judgment. He will not walk dignifiedly through the traditional part of the President of America," Emerson lamented,

but will pop his head out at each railroad station and make a little speech, and get into an argument with Squire A or Judge B. He will write letters to Horace Greeley, and any editor or reporter or saucy party commitee that writes to him, and cheapen himself... Let the clown appear.<sup>6</sup>

For Emerson, Lincoln's lack of dignity degraded both himself and the office. Sound familiar? Simply substitute "television spot" for "railroad station" and "twister" for "letter writing" and you have Donald Trump. Uneducated, uncouth, common, crass, Lincoln in Emerson's eyes appears much like The Donald in ours. Emerson never could shake the sense that what played in Peoria performed miserably for the nation, that Lincoln's extraordinary shortcomings, like those of General Jackson before him, reflected as much the deficiencies of American democracy as the foibles of the prairie president himself. Lincoln's election sorely tested Emerson's faith in the democratic republic. "We must accept the results of universal suffrage," he bemoaned, "& not try to make it appear that we can elect fine gentlemen, No, we shall have course men ..."<sup>7</sup> So too today. Surely, 2016 tested our faith. The meaning of sixty-three million Americans voting Donald J. Trump for president perplexes us all. If the American people had re-elected him, he would we have sounded the death knell of democracy?

The analogy goes deeper. Hillary Clinton won the popular vote in 2016. Trump, like Lincoln, proved to be a minority president, elected by fewer than half the voting public. Lincoln garnered only 40% of the vote in 1860, albeit in a crowded field of four candidates. Minority presidents both, and the Emersonian affinities notwithstanding, Trump is no Lincoln. Far be it for me to engage in closer comparison. My emphasis here is less about 2016 than about Antebellum America. As a historian, my interests are retrospective. I would not be surprised if 2016's astonishing result illuminated some aspects of Abraham Lincoln and how we evaluate him. Trump will never be Lincoln in our eyes.

I suspect profounder issues conspire to diminish our estimation of Lincoln. Lincoln's shrinking reputation among Americanists precedes the Resistance and despising The Donald. Its roots lie deeper, connected to our general historical outlook as well as our sociological and epistemological assumptions. Before exploring the sources of our disillusion, a brief review of some of the literature of Lincoln and his image is in order. Multiple and varied scholarly works have plumbed the evolution of Lincoln's reputation, the most prominent being those of Merrill Peterson and Barry Schwartz. Peterson's *Lincoln in American Memory* (1994) offered a useful typology of Lincoln tropes. Peterson interwove popular and scholarly renderings to remind us that Lincoln's reputation has waned and waxed in the century and a half since his death. In his concluding chapter, "Lincoln at 150," Peterson distilled down the five major themes at the center of the Lincoln legacy. Scholars know them well: Honest Abe, the self-made man, the tribune of the people, the savior of the Union, and the Great Emancipator.

More recently, Barry Schwartz has written on Lincoln in the popular culture. A sociologist, his interest lies less with history or biography than with social psychology. His *Abraham Lincoln and the Forge of National Memory* offers a Lincoln for what he describes as a "post-heroic age." "The diminishing of Lincoln's relevance," Schwartz writes, "is an aspect of postmodernity and multiculturalism, which together constitute the core of the post-heroic era." The American public seems far wiser and analytical than previous generations; it no longer needs or trusts heroic images of any sort. Not only have past masters given the public scholarship that highlights previous generations' racism, sexism and other moral shortcomings; they have reimagined the American project from the boom up. Answering the question about "who built America" demands a social history of the common people going about their business in spite of entrenched elites and their idols. It's nothing less than a history without heroes. Schwartz's Lincoln proves no different from Washington or Jefferson in the eighteenth century or FDR or John Kennedy in the twentieth, hardly more than symbols for their respective ages. Father figures we no longer want or need. Our "post-heroic" ethos explains the descent.<sup>8</sup>

For all its aptness, Schwartz's sociology seems useful but limited in its application. By failing to distinguish between popular perceptions and

scholarly interpretations of the American experience, he misconstrues the latter. Americanists too share in the post-heroic culture. Yet, as professionals, they (we) commit themselves to historical explanation and evidenced-based judgment in ways that ordinary folk do not. Scholarly rationale for diminishing Lincoln relates more to epistemological and historically-grounded commitments—commitments tied to exploring evidence well beyond the scribblings of the upper crust and their ideological cheerleaders. Our present-day scholarly sensibilities inform our professorial evaluation of the sixteenth president. For want of better terms, I label these five sensibilities the socio-historical, the collectivist, the intersectional, the post-political, and the post-patriotic.

The first is social-historical. As social historians for the most part, contemporary scholars of American culture have increasingly focused on group identity over the individual, eschewing biography, especially of European white males. When it comes to Lincoln, we especially reject the notion of the Great Emancipator. Thomas Ball's 1876 Emancipation Memorial, for example, with its heavy-handed analogizing of Lincoln and Moses seems an embarrassment—"a monument to white supremacy," one writer declared in the wake of Charlottesville.<sup>9</sup> Despite the endurance in the popular mind of the image of Lincoln liberating the slaves, Americanists have countered with a history "from the bottom up" that minimizes the actions of a conservative chief executive in favour of those acting in concert, abolitionists and African Americans in particular. "Lincoln's entire reputation as an antislavery leader has been called into question," writes Harold Holzer in *Emancipating Lincoln*; "in some circles he has retreated in reputation from liberator to obstructionist."<sup>10</sup> Textbooks now stress how the Emancipation Proclamation to which Lincoln affixed his signature actually freed no slaves, how it followed on from and was a reaction to the Second Confiscation Act of the Radical Republicans, and reflected more the military necessity of the moment than a genuine commitment to black freedom. Tens of thousands of slaves risked life and limb to liberate themselves by fleeing plantations, reuniting families and, for a crucial minority, joining the Union Army.<sup>11</sup> Not only do we now consider Lincoln as Great Emancipator a fiction, but a pernicious one at that. "The heart of the matter was this," writes Vincent Harding, "while the concrete historical realities of the time testified to the



costly, daring, courageous activities of hundreds of thousands of black people breaking loose from slavery and seeing themselves free, the myth gave the credit for this freedom to a white Republican president."<sup>12</sup> What Harding merely ventured in the 1980s has become historical orthodoxy a generation later. Lincoln deserves little more than a footnote in a story of African Americans liberating themselves.

The second element, the collectivist, speaks to a rejection of the old canard of Lincoln as a self-made man. A real-life Horatio Alger, Lincoln in text and textbook symbolized for generations the ideal of American individualism in the guise of "to each according to her abilities." Lincoln served as flesh-and-blood proof that hard work pays off in an unbiased nation of striving individuals. An autodidact, honest and incredibly hardworking, Lincoln lifted himself out of poverty, and his meteoric rise on his own virtues is often seen as constituting the ultimate testament to America as meritocracy. This is the Lincoln that Carl Sandburg invented in Pulitzer Prize-winning fashion a century ago.

In a penetrating essay from the 1940s, Richard Hofstadter demonstrated how Lincoln self-consciously cultivated his image, playing a critical role in conjuring up, or at least burnishing, the self-made myth. This is the Lincoln that shrewdly sat for Matthew Brady just hours before delivering the address at Cooper Union that would propel him to the leadership of the Republican Party. This is the self-eacing Lincoln who, when he had to climb through a window to the dais before Knox College in the Great Debates, joked to the crowd: "now no one can say that I have not gone through college." His insouciant jokes and self-eacing humor served the purpose of cultivating a specific and politically useful image. Hofstadter's demystifying insights into the ironies at the core of the American political tradition busted the myth of the aw-shucks, rags-to-riches Lincoln, but it hardly diminished his reputation. No bumbling fool, Lincoln proved highly politically savvy in cultivating his image, an image, Hofstadter concluded, "by which he had lived and for which he had been so persuasive a spokesman."<sup>13</sup>

It was rather for us, three generations on from Hofstadter to denigrate the entire notion of rugged, or any form of, American individualism. The collective has more than displaced the individual as the locus of meaning and agency; it has also heightened our sense of the occluding

nature of the ideology of individualism. Most scholars would likely agree with the political scientist Jack Turner who, writing on the antebellum period, explores “the elective affinity between American individualism and structural injustice.”<sup>14</sup> In 1858, Lincoln famously declared, “All I ask for the negro is that if you do not like him, let him alone,” never considering for a moment the link between individualism and white supremacy. Being largely blind to social structure, as contemporary academics are not, Lincoln seemed oblivious to how the myth of the self-made man enabled him “to participate in unjust social structures with a sense of perfect innocence.”<sup>15</sup> Lincoln’s assassination surely propelled the Republican North toward a more forceful program of Reconstruction. Yet, at the same time, the potency of the Lincoln self-made myth undermined the post-war possibilities of enhanced federal action on behalf of ex-slaves. Many whites, Republican and Democrat alike, doubted the efficacy of the Freedman’s Bureau precisely because it challenged their sense of individual achievement solely through self-discipline and hard work. Turner concludes that, then as now, the individualist ethos serves as a standing challenge to collectivist action. “White individualists’ blindness to social structure prevents them from seeing how their beneficial placement in America’s racial hierarchy belies their professed sovereign independence.”<sup>16</sup> The Former American President (and my old Columbia classmate) perhaps best summarized Progressives’ contempt for the self-made myth when he declared at a rally in Roanoke, Virginia: “If you’ve been successful, you didn’t get there on your own . . . . You didn’t build that.”<sup>17</sup> Even if his words are taken out of context, which they have been, President Obama in 2013 expressed exquisitely our collectivist ethos.

The third explanation for Lincoln’s diminution relates to intersectionality or, more properly, to a heightened sense of race, class, and gender as “interlocking categories of experience that affect all aspects of human life.”<sup>18</sup> Derived from decades of work pioneered by women of color, intersectionality speaks, in Jean Ait Belkhir’s words, to understanding people “whose multiple statuses cannot be separated or prioritized,” statuses that are linked in multiple ways to discriminatory practices of the dominant social groups.<sup>19</sup> It is well-nigh impossible today to relate to what seems to be earlier generations’ wholesale sympathy for the trials of a poor, young, white, Anglo Abraham Lincoln. Born in Sinking Creek, Kentucky to a

ne'er-do-well father, Lincoln's log-cabin origins and rail-splitting exertions of his childhood poverty typified for generations of Americans a particular version of frontier deprivation that elicited sympathy and compassion. Most concurred with Lincoln's own assessment of his youth. "It can all be condensed into a single sentence; and that sentence you will find in Gray's *Elegy*: "The short and simple annals of the poor."<sup>20</sup>

The polarities in the twenty-first century have reversed. How was *his* life replete with suffering? Largely self-educated and without much of a patrimony, Lincoln yet lived under his father's aegis until maturity. At twenty-one, he moved seamlessly into and among a community of folks who looked and spoke just like him. While few would go so far as to demand that Abe park his privilege at the door, most scholars now are quick to acknowledge how his whiteness enabled him to progress in very public legal and political careers. In contrast, and not very convincingly, the biographer Michael Burlingame argues that Lincoln's impoverished youth enabled him not only to relate to the enslaved but to actually identify with them. "As a youth," Burlingame claims, "Lincoln was like a slave to his father... ." And again, at twenty-one "Lincoln fled the quasi-slavery he endured at the hands of his father."<sup>21</sup> Burlingame's reading seems as wrong and tendentious as the bulk of his already dated two-thousand page encomium. Doors opened to Lincoln were *not* slammed shut for women, African Americans, and Amerindians. They were never open in the first place.

Lincoln the lawyer actually endeavored to keep shut some of those very same doors. Slavery might well have had the "power of making me miserable," as Lincoln wrote a friend in 1855, but it hardly impeded the partnership of Lincoln and Herndon from representing a slaveowner eight years earlier.<sup>22</sup> Lincoln defended the Kentucky planter Robert Matson in 1847, a choice that Eric Foner has described as "inexcusable." That Lincoln's client had threatened to sell his human property "down South into the cotton fields" if she persisted in her petition for freedom hardly inhibited Abe from extolling him before the court as "an extremely kind and indulgent master."<sup>23</sup> Apologists for Lincoln portray the Matson case as exceptional. Brian Dirck correctly observed in *Lincoln the Lawyer* (2007) that "race was a negligible presence in his practice." We might be less sympathetic with his facile dismissal of Lerone Benne's observation

that “in twenty-three years of litigation he never defended a runaway slave, but he did defend a slaveholder (Robert Matson).”<sup>24</sup> This version of the fledgling Lincoln recalls less Carl Sandburg’s “Young Eagle,” eliciting our sympathy as “a friendless, uneducated, penniless boy”<sup>25</sup> wandering the prairie, than the lost souls of J. D. Vance’s 2016 *Hillbilly Elegy*.<sup>26</sup>

Fourth in the list of shrinkage, and perhaps most academic and controversial, is what might be styled the post-political. Americans have long been divided about their politics and politicians. On the one hand, American political culture seems rude, crass, and corrupt, worthy of late-night humor at best. On the other hand, that same culture can inspire profound respect and awe. Americans have long cherished their Constitution, celebrated their broad franchise, devoted themselves to annual public elections and long sustained robust party affiliations. For the most part, they have maintained a deep and abiding faith in their recourse to the political arena for finding solutions to pressing social problems. Donkeys and elephants to be sure, but Americans assume themselves to be political animals in a miraculously structured system of governance. For more than two centuries, they have believed in the genius of American politics even as they found it amusing and, occasionally, embarrassing in the extreme. It endures as a classic love-hate relationship.

Lincoln’s greatness, such as it is, hangs on his embodiment of and dedication to democratic politics. It is the political Lincoln that for generations of Americans, scholar and citizen alike, signified the essence of his public reputation. The prairie Whig, the state legislator, the debater with Douglas, the Republican dark horse nominee, the democratically-elected (and re-elected) president, the *primus inter pares* of (Doris Kearns Goodwin’s two-million-copy selling) *Team of Rivals*—these constitute the vital elements of the heroic collective biography of Abraham Lincoln. They serve as the marrow of the great Lincoln myth. If it is indeed the case that Americans, or at least Americanists, have become post-political, then these famous markers of democratic statesmanship shrink in proportion to our growing conviction that politics has degenerated into the merely partisan.

Today, many among the educated classes have lost, or are fast losing, confidence in the political process. Reform and compromise have failed

to deliver solutions to social ills, much less to desperately needed structural reforms. In a world of failed politics, phronesis proves less a skill crucial to channelling social discontent into meaningful reform than the last gasp of self-serving and careerist politicians desperate to stymy radical change. If political institutions function, as Jürgen Habermas famously claimed, merely as the means of legitimation of a malevolent order, then politicians serve not ideals but interests. As Michel Foucault has taught us, transcendent ideals around which disparate groups might compromise simply do not exist. They are pathetic anodynes. Bloviating elected officials are but enablers, who fool us and themselves into believing in something beyond the facts of power and interest.

Abraham Lincoln has long represented the pinnacle of American political phronesis. Scholars in the twenty-first century might narrowly agree with Richard Hofstadter and David Donald, who a generation or longer ago brilliantly evoked Lincoln's political genius, and yet disagree utterly with their approbations.<sup>27</sup> One can concur with virtually all of Donald's 1995 prize-winning portrait of a remarkably transactional Lincoln and yet find his extolling of the Republican president entirely misplaced. Donald's admiration of Lincoln's political brilliance has become our diffidence toward, or condemnation of, the merely partisan. More recently, Goodwin's best-selling celebration of Lincoln as the selfless master of team of rivals reads less like "political genius" than a depiction of the chairman of a board of old white men who seem utterly ignorant of just how bankrupt and futile were their attempts at genuine leadership.<sup>28</sup> In the era of the post-political, Lincoln shrinks to a famous footnote of a failed experiment.

Finally, Lincoln shrinks in direct proportion to our assessment of the American project overall. If his greatness rested foremost on his status as the "savior of the Union," then his reputation necessarily ebbs as we increasingly disparage the United States and its role in the world. Indeed, we doubly dismiss him. Lincoln more than defended a true Union of states while sending tens of thousands of boys off to die for its preservation. He conjured it up in the first place. The crowning achievement of the Lincoln nationalist imagination came on a chilly November afternoon at the consecration of the national cemetery at Gettysburg. Garry Wills stamped Lincoln's 272-word address "a giant swindle" that romantically invoked

a “new ideological luggage” to bind together a united American people.<sup>29</sup> In 1863, Lincoln called into creation out of a group of disparate states a singular American nation, one that many of us believe to be, as George Kateb writes in his *Lincoln’s Political Thought*, “the cruellest tyranny in the world.”<sup>30</sup> Kateb’s work recalls Eric Foner long ago in his graduate seminar at Columbia University assigning a libertarian’s reading of the Civil War, the conclusion of which was something akin to why the people of the world would have been better off with a Confederate victory. Carving up America before it became a great empire, Foner averred, might have averted the rise of the American empire and thus been a benefit to subalterns the world over. This interpretation, which I suspect far more than just libertarians would heartily endorse, leaves little room for Abraham Lincoln as the savior of anything. Lincoln languishes.

It does seem that American Studies has drifted a long way from its original mooring. The words of its first president, Harvard’s Perry Miller, might be useful in formulating the problem of our post-patriotic American Studies selves. The progenitor of the field, from his earliest days on the banks of the Congo, Miller was consumed, as he put it, with “the pressing need for expounding my America.”<sup>31</sup> Ranging across the decades and traversing multiple disciplines his scholarship predicated *an* America, a something that had meaning and identity and could be encompassed, explained even, in a grand story. Twenty-first century Americanists spurn master narratives. We instinctively resist reductive Millerian titles such as “The Shaping of the American Character,” “An American Language” and “Nature and the National Ego” in about equal measure as we generally disdain intellectual history and the positing of a New England or a national mind. Recalling Marx’s dictum that “a science that hesitates to forget its founders is lost,” it seems fitting to acknowledge Miller only in American Studies’ rear-view mirror as we cast aspersion on anything like a history of American minds or ideas.

Before one joins recent American Studies Association president Amy Kaplan in laughing off the presumption and naiveté of the very notion of an America, we might read anew Miller’s oeuvre.<sup>32</sup> If we dismiss Miller and eschew *The New England Mind* and *Errand into the Wilderness*, we do so at our own peril. Perry Miller was no reductive cypher, his work hardly smacks of a spread-eagled triumphalism. Rather, he proved a

subtle wielder of the dialectic, whose work demonstrates even today a staggering mastery of the high culture. Ironist supreme, Miller simplified nothing. Plying the trade of paradox, misdirection, and deep reading, he engaged profoundly with American culture, exploring how at once (and I quote) “our words mean what they say” and “signify more than they say.” Perry Miller no less than his Harvard successor and one-time ASA president Sacvan Bercovitch grasped the difficulty of self-understanding and the interplay of rites of dissent and assent. “It’s a strange thing—to be an American,” Miller liked to quote Archibald MacLeish. “This, this is our land, this is our people, that is neither a land nor a race.”<sup>33</sup> To my mind, Miller and MacLeish share a quest for national character that at once embraces romance and conspicuously counters blood-and-soil romanticism. Miller’s Americanism has virtually nothing in common with the racial reductions of Johann von Herder or the malign nationalism of the Third Reich. But here we may well disagree. Some of us may reject as insidious any high cultural attempts to define national character and see more commonality than contrast in James Fenimore Cooper and Friedrich Schiller, Emerson and Nietzsche, or Lincoln and Bismarck.

In the imagined community of American Studies, no person has figured more prominently in our master narrative than Abraham Lincoln. If we find ourselves jeering the former, then there can be little surprise or shock that the latter has had his comeuppance. We’ve had a belly full of histories of the great deeds of the great Americans. Lincoln remains, of course, but merely as a man, one captive to his times, his class, his gender and, as Nietzsche observed, “the racial scabies of his heart.” We refuse to tell a single story of the “meaning of America,” or any story with an old-fashioned, bigoted male lead.

#### notes

1. David W. Blight, “The Theology of Lincoln in Scholarship, Politics and Public Memory,” in Eric Foner, ed., *Our Lincoln* (New York City: Norton, 2008), 269. Statistics on visitors to the National Mall are from National Parks Website: <https://www.nps.gov/nationalmallplan/Documents/Media/NAMA%20Fact%20Sheet.pdf>.

2. The trifecta consists of the Pulitzer, Lincoln and Bancroft prizes. “Lincoln industrial complex” was a personal remark from 2011.

3. ANZASA statistical data accrued from previous conference bulletins. See <https://anzasa.org/conference>.
4. Similarly as above, the statistical data for the ASA annual convention was accrued from conference bulletins available online. See <https://www.theasa.net/annual-meeting/past-meetings>.
5. E. H. Carr, *What is History?* (New York: Knopf, 1962), 30.
6. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks*, vol. XV (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Belknap Press, 1982), 218.
7. Emerson, *Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks*, 218.
8. Merrill Peterson, *Lincoln in American Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); and Barry Schwartz, *Lincoln and the Forge of National Memory* (Chicago: UC Press, 2000); see too Schwartz's *Abraham Lincoln in the Post-Heroic Era: History and Memory in Late Twentieth-Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).
9. Raul Fernandez, "A Monument to White Supremacy stands Uncontested in our own Backyard," *Medium* (11 October, 2017), <https://medium.com/@raulspeaks/a-monument-to-white-supremacy-stands-uncontested-in-our-own-back-yard-672f26db429c>.
10. Harold Holzer, *Emancipating Lincoln* (Cambridge: Harvard Press, 2012), 2.
11. Princeton University historian James McPherson offers a strong dissenting view in his *Tried by Fire: Abraham Lincoln as Commander in Chief*: "And in most of the cases," McPherson writes, "it was the military lines that came to the slaves, not vice versa as the Northern armies penetrated deeper into the South. It was the commander in chief of those armies who oversaw the events and made the crucial decisions ... ." See this quotation from his "A. Lincoln, Commander in Chief," in Foner, ed., *Our Lincoln*, 20.
12. Vincent Harding, *There is a River: The Black Struggle for Freedom in America* (New York: Harcourt, 1981), 236.
13. Richard Hofstadter, "Abraham Lincoln and the Self-Made Myth," *The American Political Tradition and the Men who Made it* (New York: Harpers, 1948), 173.
14. Jack Turner, "American Individualism and Structural Injustice: Tocqueville, Gender, and Race," *Polity* 40, no. 2 (2008): 197.
15. Turner, "American Individualism," 214.
16. Turner, "American Individualism," 200.
17. Barack Obama, "Speech at Roanoke," Roanoke, Virginia, 13 July, 2013.
18. Jean Ait Belkhir, "Race, Gender & Class Intersectionality," *Race, Gender & Class Journal* 8, no. 3 (2001): 157.
19. Belkhir, "Race, Gender & Class Intersectionality," 157.
20. Quoted in John L. Scripps, 1860 campaign biography.
21. Michael Burlingame, *The Inner World of Abraham Lincoln* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 37, 41.
22. Roy P. Basler, ed., *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, vol. II (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 321.
23. Eric Foner, *The Fiery Trial*, 48–9.



24. Brian Dirck, *Lincoln the Lawyer* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 148–49.
25. Basler, ed., *Collected Works*, vol. I, 321.
26. Consider “abolitionists, especially in New England, criticized the war, as well as those, like a young Abe Lincoln in Illinois, who opposed the expansion of slavery. Yet there were white abolitionists who, while opposing slavery, nonetheless heralded a racialized “manifest destiny.” The abolitionist Theodore Parker “declared that expansion was inevitable as a consequence of racial gi s and that it would bring with it a regime of Anglo-Saxon dominance.” See Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1974), 11.
27. Hofstadter, “Self-Made Myth”; Donald, *Lincoln*.
28. Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005).
29. Garry Wills, *Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words that Remade America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 38.
30. George Kateb, *Lincoln’s Political Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 43.
31. Perry Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1952), vii.
32. Amy Kaplan, “Violent Belongings and the Question of Empire Today: Presidential Address to the American Studies Association, October 17, 2003,” *American Quarterly* 56, no. 1 (Mar. 2004): 1–18.
33. Perry Miller, “The Shaping of the American Character,” *The New England Quarterly* 28, no. 4 (Dec. 1955), 438.