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Review of "The Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln and American Slavery"

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Eric Foner. *The Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln and American Slavery*. New York: W. W. Norton & Co, 2010.

It's difficult to imagine that much new is left to say about Abraham Lincoln or any minute aspect of his life, relationships, humor, beliefs, or any other aspect of his life or legacy. In *The Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln and American Slavery*, however, Eric Foner provides a refreshingly new look into Lincoln's constant evolution regarding slavery and race in American life. In tracing Lincoln's early beliefs - or distressing lack thereof - and the changes wrought in Lincoln's beliefs through experience and exposure, Foner adds considerable inflection to the portrait of Lincoln as the mythical "Great Emancipator." Foner's Lincoln instead is much less admirable in some ways, but eminently much more human than usually portrayed. Eric Foner's scholarship indeed proves a valuable addition to our understanding of Abraham Lincoln.

Foner states in his Preface that, "the hallmark of Lincoln's greatness was his capacity for growth."¹ Though Lincoln is often portrayed as constantly growing, Foner also manages to shed the reverential tone that has allowed - or encouraged- many others to minimize less comfortable aspects of Lincoln's racial beliefs. Foner's portrayal of the young Lincoln is that of a wildly ambitious, moderately successful politician and dedicated lawyer. Ultimately dedicated to the rule of law, Lincoln argued cases on all sides of debates over slavery and institutionalized racism, demonstrating the prominence he ascribed to the Constitution rather than any personal beliefs he may have held. A steadfast Whig, he seemingly dedicated little thought to the issues surrounding slavery aside from a generalized opposition. His reemergence into political life in the wake of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, Foner argues, stemmed from this same belief in the rule of law; "Douglas' bill represented a profound departure from the original intention of the founding fathers, who sought to restrict the spread of slavery and hoped to see it eventually die out."² In contextualizing Lincoln as a former Whig who focused on other issues, Foner demonstrates the relatively unformed nature of Lincoln's early beliefs.

As a savvy politician, Lincoln navigated the slavery issue perhaps as well as any other, not falling prey to a comment such as William Henry Seward's "irrepressible conflict" or Stephen Douglas' Freeport Doctrine, yet Lincoln was caught squarely in the inescapable path of the issue. Careful to balance the competing concerns of Border States with Abolitionists, Lincoln continually sought as president to adhere to the Constitution. Foner points out that because

¹ Foner, p. xix.

² Foner, p. 66.



Lincoln “believed that secession was illegal, the states remained in the Union with all their constitutional rights intact.”³ Congress held no such beliefs, however, and continually pushed Lincoln to act on the very real exigency of escaping slaves in the South. Foner’s implication that Lincoln may have not dealt squarely with the issue of slavery had these men and women not forced his hand supports the argument that the slaves truly freed themselves – likely a statement with which Lincoln would have agreed.

“I claim not to have controlled events but to confess plainly that events have controlled me,” Lincoln stated, and indeed truly so.⁴ However, in following the lead of escaping slaves, Lincoln demonstrated the strength of character that has earned him such historical acclaim. Foner documents the institutional opposition and logistical challenges Lincoln encountered in instituting the proclamation, yet also details Lincoln’s ambiguous feelings about race relations. Lincoln consistently demonstrated a preference for gradual abolition, and his long-stated opposition to slavery did not translate into a belief that the end of slavery should lead to racial equality. Foner argues, “Lincoln did not see Reconstruction was an opportunity for a weeping political and social revolution beyond emancipation.”⁵ While true at the time of his death, it may not have remained so had Lincoln lived to serve a second term.

Eric Foner provides a fair assessment of the Lincoln’s brilliance as well as a clear-eyed view of his weaknesses. He also provides a timely reminder that in holding our political leaders to once-stated beliefs, we deny them the space to adapt to changing or unforeseen circumstances. In facing such a monumental challenge as navigating the Civil War, Lincoln made many admirable decisions and many that were less than supportive of equality. In providing a very human view of Abraham Lincoln, Foner allows us to remember yet again why he deserves the mantle of greatness. Not because he was perfect, but rather because of his clear realization that he was not.

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³ Foner, 165.

⁴ Foner, p. 245.

⁵ Foner, 335.