

Peter Goode

Teaching American History

Book Review: The Real Lincoln by Thomas J DiLorenzo

September 09

"The challenge in writing history is to get the reader beyond thinking that things had to be the way they turned out and to see the range of possibilities of how it could be otherwise" - David McCullough. Well, Mr. McCullough words rang so very true after I completed "The Real Lincoln" by Thomas J DiLorenzo. Mr DiLorenzo certainly challenges our most common understandings of what history has always portrayed as one of America's most honored presidents, Abraham Lincoln. In fact, the author challenges almost all of our notions that Abraham Lincoln was one of our greatest presidents and the author's criticism of Lincoln varies on a spectrum from destroyer of states' rights to unlawful dictator . I will summarize the contents of LiRenzo's work into three main categories; First, Lincoln's view on slavery, secondly, why we did not have a peaceful emancipation, and thirdly, Lincoln's subversion of our Constitution.

The author introduces this book by clearly stating that most words written about Abraham Lincoln have been myth. Most Americans know of Abraham Lincoln as the Great Emancipator, but Dilorenzo would prefer Lincoln to be known as The Great Centralizer (as in the strength of the federal government ). Most Americans have learned about Lincoln through supportive historians, claims the author. DiLorenzo adds that the typical American would be shocked at Lincoln's own words. DiLorenzo points out that Lincoln's own words support and defend slavery. "When slave owners remind us of their

constitutional rights to own slaves, I acknowledge them, not grudgingly but fully and fairly"- (in support of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850). In a debate with Douglas in 1858 in Illinois, Lincoln states, "I have no purpose to introduce political and social equality between the white and black races. I am in favor of the race to which I belong having the superior position." Lincoln added he "had never been in favor of making voters or jurors of Negroes, nor of qualifying them to hold office, nor to intermarry with white people." The author insinuates the shrewdness of Lincoln as a politician, as often Lincoln would mention the "monstrous injustice" of slavery, while on the other hand opposing the social and political equality of the races, as Lincoln tried to play the political game of getting the maximum support from the American people. Nothing better amplifies this "having it both ways" idea than when Lincoln, at the eulogy of his dear friend Henry Clay, compared similarly his thoughts on slavery to Clay's, "both having a deep devotion to liberty, however no wise man has perceived how slavery could be at once eradicated, without producing a greater evil, even to the cause of human liberty itself." Therefore, Lincoln believed that slavery was an assault on liberty, yet ending it would be worse. Abraham Lincoln's only real solution was Henry Clay's colonization idea as Lincoln stated, "Send them to Liberia, to their own native land, there they will carry back to their native soil the rich fruits of religion, civilization, law and liberty." Thomas DiLorenzo maintains that historians have been making excuses for Lincoln for a long time; Lincoln was not an abolitionist and hardly should be called the Great Emancipator.

" My paramount object in this struggle is to save the Union, and it is not to save or destroy slavery. If I could save the Union without freeing any slave I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone I would also do that. What I do

about slavery, and the colored race, I do because I believe it helps to save the Union."- Abraham Lincoln's words to the New York Tribune in 1862, and the author believes these words emphasize the point that Lincoln wasn't truly concerned over emancipation. Emancipation, however was an idea whose time had come throughout the world by the time of our Civil War. Starting with the Quakers and continuing through the Enlightenment, many countries had begun to champion the cause of equal rights and natural rights under the law. In addition, the author points out that economic pressures were there as well to end slavery. DiLorenzo claims that slave labor "is inherently inefficient compared to free labor." Not only do slaves see no incentive to improve their skills or improve their production, slavery itself "cannot stand the competition of free labor and its profitability sealed its doom in the market economy." (pages 47&48) All across the globe, as slavery lost its profitability, peaceful emancipation happened. In some countries emancipation came in the form of manumission, in others it came via compensated emancipation. There was a growing feeling in the United States, as well, that a gradual and peaceful emancipation could come about. According to DiLorenzo, Lincoln never seized this opportunity and instead chose war. If Lincoln was such a master politician with such legendary speaking and political skills, why didn't he succeed to lead his country to a peaceful emancipation, like every other country where slavery had existed had done. Maybe, the author hints, that Lincoln never did favor the idea of emancipation.

President Lincoln did things that our modern day presidents could never get away with as he subverted the Constitution many times during his presidency. Most Americans, in 1861, believed in the right of secession, according to DiLorenzo. But as soon as Lincoln

took office, he immediately began his assault on the Constitution to stop the secession of the Southern states. First unconstitutional act was the launching of an invasion of the South without approval of Congress. Next was the blockading of Southern ports followed by suspending the writ of habeas corpus, creating an army out of state militias while Congress was out of session, followed by the arrest of newspaper editors who disagreed with the president as well as censoring the telegraph and nationalizing the railroads to name a few. "This amazing disregard for the Constitution," wrote historian Clinton Rossiter, "was considered by nobody as legal" (pg 132). DiLorenzo states that no man who had respect for our constitutional liberty would ever had done such things, acts unthinkable to our founding fathers. Abraham Lincoln had created a revolution, a revolution of assault on the Constitution, a revolution that created a highly centralized federal government. Thomas DiLorenzo asserts that this was a main goal of the Lincoln presidency; to create a large, activist central state.

In conclusion, I enjoyed *The Real Lincoln* a great deal. It was a very enjoyable read for me as it questioned the Lincoln I knew. After completing this book, I believe, however that the author had an agenda to paint Lincoln in a bad light and he would cite any quote or dissect any and every decision Lincoln made just to create some controversy. I believe a good historian does not portray his views on his writing of history, and DiLorenzo seemingly has an agenda to prove; that Lincoln was one of our worst and most dangerous presidents. Yes, it is true that Lincoln was not perfect, but I am sure a weaker president would have failed in probably the most important crisis that has ever faced our country-preserving our Union.

[Go to CCC TAH Web Site](#)