“Was Lincoln a Racist?”

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I first encountered Abraham Lincoln in Piedmont, W.Va. When I was growing up, his picture was in nearly every black home I can recall, the only white man, other than Jesus himself, to grace black family walls. Lincoln was a hero to us.

One rainy Sunday afternoon in 1960, when I was 10 years old, I picked up a copy of our latest Reader’s Digest Condensed Books, and, thumbing through, stumbled upon Jim Bishop’s [*The Day Lincoln Was Shot*](https://www.amazon.com/dp/0517446499?tag=therootcom-20&camp=0&creative=0&linkCode=as4&creativeASIN=0517446499&adid=0DJ86V7VVENWAYMKWVXA&), which had been published in 1955 and immediately became a runaway bestseller. It is an hour-by-hour chronicle of the last day of Lincoln’s life. I couldn’t help crying by the end.

But my engagement with the great leader turned to confusion when I was a senior in high school. I stumbled upon an essay that [Lerone Bennett Jr.](https://www.amazon.com/dp/0874850029?tag=therootcom-20&camp=0&creative=0&linkCode=as4&creativeASIN=0874850029&adid=0C80EGZ9XHS1K4GWVZNW&) published in *Ebony* magazine entitled “Was Abe Lincoln a White Supremacist?” A year later, as an undergraduate at Yale, I read an even more troubling essay that W.E.B. Du Bois had published in *The Crisis* magazine in May 1922. Du Bois wrote that Lincoln was one huge jumble of contradictions: “he was [big enough to be inconsistent](https://www.amazon.com/dp/0674027744?tag=therootcom-20&camp=0&creative=0&linkCode=as4&creativeASIN=0674027744&adid=0CKJYSR2ZYGW90A2YXQY&)—cruel, merciful; peace-loving, a fighter; despising Negroes and letting them fight and vote; protecting slavery and freeing slaves. He was a man—a big, inconsistent, brave man.”

So many hurt and angry readers flooded Du Bois’ mailbox that he wrote a second essay in the next issue of the magazine, in which he defended his position this way: “I love him not because he was perfect but because he was not and yet triumphed. ….”

To prove his point, Du Bois included this quote from a [speech Lincoln delivered in 1858](http://www.nps.gov/liho/historyculture/debate4.htm) in Charleston, Ill.:

“I will say, then, that I am not, nor ever have been, in favor of bringing about in any way the social and political equality of the white and black races—that I am not, nor ever have been, in favor of making voters or jurors of Negroes, nor of qualifying them to hold office, nor to intermarry with white people; and I will say in addition to this, that there is a physical difference between the white and black races which I believe will forever forbid the two races living together on terms of social and political equality. And inasmuch as they cannot so live, while they do remain together there must be the position of superior and inferior, and I, as much as any other man, am in favor of having the superior position assigned to the white race.”

Say what? The Lincoln of 1858 was a very long way from becoming the Great Emancipator!

So which was the real Lincoln, the benevolent countenance hanging on the walls of black people’s homes, the Man Who Freed the Slaves, or this man whom Du Bois was quoting, who seemed to hate black people?

In the collective popular imagination, Abraham Lincoln—Father Abraham, the Great Emancipator—is often represented as an island of pure reason in a sea of mid-19th-century racist madness, a beacon of tolerance blessed with a cosmopolitan sensibility above or beyond race, a man whose attitudes about race and slavery transcended his time and place. These contemporary views of Lincoln, however, are largely naive and have almost always been ahistorical.

When Peter Kunhardt—my co-executive producer in the making of the PBS series “[African American Lives](http://www.pbs.org/wnet/aalives/)”—asked me two years ago to co-produce, write and host a new PBS series on Lincoln, timed to air on the bicentennial of his birth, I realized that making this film would give me, at long last, the chance to ask, “Will the real Abraham Lincoln please stand up?” I also extensively researched and analyzed Lincoln’s writings and speeches for my book, [*Lincoln on Race and Slavery*](https://www.amazon.com/dp/0691142343?tag=therootcom-20&camp=0&creative=0&linkCode=as4&creativeASIN=0691142343&adid=11P9ZBV4B443EHPFMCYW&).

Lincoln’s myth is so capacious that each generation of Americans since his death in 1865 has been able to find its own image reflected in his mirror. Lincoln is America’s man for all seasons, and our man for all reasons. In fact, over and over again through the past century and a half, we Americans have reinvented Abraham Lincoln in order to reinvent ourselves. The most recent example, of course, is captured in the journey of our 44th president, Barack Obama, who [launched his presidential campaign](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gdJ7Ad15WCA) in Lincoln’s hometown, Springfield, Ill., cited Lincoln’s oratory repeatedly throughout his campaign, retraced his train route to Washington from Philadelphia and even used [Lincoln’s Bible](http://www.usatoday.com/news/politics/2008-12-23-inauguration-obama_N.htm) for his swearing-in ceremony.

On the eve of the 200th anniversary of his birth, the Lincoln fable is as vital today as ever. For [my PBS series](http://www.pbs.org/wnet/lookingforlincoln/), I filmed all over the country, from a Sotheby’s auction where an obscure letter of his sold for $3 million, to the annual convention last summer of the Sons of the Confederacy, where one official told me that Lincoln is the biggest war criminal in the history of the United States, that his face should be chiseled off Mount Rushmore and that he should be tried posthumously for war crimes under the Nuremberg Conventions!

In the black community, despite strident critiques of his attitudes about blacks by historians such as Bennett, Lincoln continues to occupy a place of almost holy reverence, the patron saint of race relations.

But the truth is that until very late in his presidency, Lincoln was deeply conflicted about whether to liberate the slaves, how to liberate the slaves and what to do with them once they had been liberated. Whereas abolition was a central aspect of Lincoln’s moral compass, racial equality was not. In fact, Lincoln wrestled with three distinct but sometimes overlapping discourses related to race: slavery, equality and colonization. Isolating these three—like the three strands of a braid of hair—helps us to understand how conflicted the man was about African Americans and their place in this country.

Interspersed among these three discourses is the manner in which Lincoln seems to have wrestled with his own use of the “N-word.” Lincoln used the word far less than did Stephen Douglas, his Democratic challenger for the U.S. Senate, but he did indeed use it in prominent contexts including debates and public speeches. Even as late as April 1862, James Redpath recorded Lincoln’s saying of President Fabre Nicholas Geffard of Haiti (who had offered to send a white man as his ambassador to the United States), “You can tell the President of Hayti that I shan’t tear my shirt if he sends a nigger here!”

Lincoln despised slavery as an institution, an economic institution that discriminated against white men who couldn’t afford to own slaves and, thus, could not profit from the advantage in the marketplace that slaves provided. At the same time, however, he was deeply ambivalent about the status of black people vis-à-vis white people, having fundamental doubts about their innate intelligence and their capacity to fight nobly with guns against white men in the initial years of the Civil War.

Even as he was writing the Emancipation Proclamation during the summer of 1862, Lincoln was working feverishly to ship all those slaves he was about to free out of the United States. So taken was he with the concept of colonization that he invited five black men to the White House and offered them funding to found a black republic in Panama, for the slaves he was about to free. Earlier, he had advocated that the slaves be freed and shipped to Liberia or Haiti. And just one month before the Emancipation became the law of the land, in his [Annual Message to Congress on Dec. 1, 1862](http://www.infoplease.com/t/hist/state-of-the-union/74.html), Lincoln proposed a constitutional amendment that would “appropriate money, and otherwise provide, for colonizing free colored persons with their own consent, at any place or places without the United States.”

Two things dramatically changed Lincoln’s attitudes toward black people. First, in the early years, the North was losing the Civil War, and Lincoln quickly realized that the margin of difference between a Southern victory and a Northern victory would be black men. So, despite severe reservations that he had expressed about the courage of black troops (“If we were to arm them, I fear that in a few weeks the arms would be in the hands of the rebels…”), Lincoln included in the Emancipation Proclamation a provision authorizing black men to fight for the Union.

The other factor that began to affect his attitudes about blacks was meeting [Frederick Douglass](http://www.mrlincolnandfreedom.org/inside.asp?ID=69&subjectID=4). Lincoln met with Douglass at the White House three times. He was the first black person Lincoln treated as an intellectual equal, and he grew to admire him and value his opinion.

Three days before he was shot, Lincoln stood on the second floor of the White House and made a speech to a crowd assembled outside celebrating the recent Union victory over the Confederacy. With his troops and Frederick Douglass very much in mind, Lincoln told the cheering crowd, which had demanded that he come to the window to address them, that he had decided to recommend that his 200,000 black troops and “the very intelligent Negroes” be given the right to vote.

Standing in the crowd was John Wilkes Booth. Hearing those words, Booth turned to a man next to him and [said](http://www.houghtonmifflinbooks.com/readers_guides/giblin/two_johnquotes.pdf), “That means nigger citizenship. Now, by God! I'll put him through. That is the last speech he will ever make.” Three days later, during the third act of [*Our American Cousin*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Our_American_Cousin), Booth followed through with his promise.

It is important that we hear Lincoln’s words through the echo of the rhetoric of the modern civil rights movement, especially the “[I Have a Dream](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PbUtL_0vAJk)” speech of Martin Luther King Jr. It is easy to forget that when Lincoln made a public address, he was speaking primarily—certainly until his Second Inaugural Address—to all-white or predominantly white audiences, who most certainly were ambivalent about blacks and black rights, if not slavery. When Lincoln talked about wrestling with the better angels of our nature, he knew whereof he spoke: about his audience and, just as important, about himself.

It should not surprise us that Lincoln was no exception to his times; what is exceptional about Abraham Lincoln is that, perhaps because of temperament or because of the shape-shifting contingencies of command during an agonizingly costly war, he wrestled with his often contradictory feelings and ambivalences and vacillations about slavery, race and colonization, and did so quite publicly and often quite eloquently.

So, was Lincoln a racist? He certainly embraced anti-black attitudes and phobias in his early years and throughout his debates with Douglas in the 1858 Senate race (the seat that would become Barack Obama’s), which he lost. By the end of the Civil War, Lincoln was on an upward arc, perhaps heading toward becoming the man he has since been mythologized as being: the Great Emancipator, the man who freed—and loved—the slaves. But his journey was certainly not complete on the day that he died. Abraham Lincoln wrestled with race until the end. And, as Du Bois pointed out, his struggle ultimately made him a more interesting and noble man than the mythical hero we have come to revere.

*Henry Louis Gates Jr. is editor in chief of****The Root.****He is co-host of the PBS series Looking for Lincoln, which premieres Feb. 11 (check local listings for time). His book,*[*Lincoln on Race and Slavery*](https://www.amazon.com/dp/0691142343?tag=therootcom-20&camp=0&creative=0&linkCode=as4&creativeASIN=0691142343&adid=0A7F5C2MQXBG9GQWDKDA&)*, is available now.*