Lincoln & Jefferson, Too
The Contradictory Braid

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Abraham Lincoln was not a historian. But he never stopped seeing himself as part of a history, stretching back to American Revolution, and particularly to the band of revolutionaries whom he liked to call the *fathers* or the *founders*, or the *framers*, and even the *patriarchs* of the American republican democracy. In February of 1860, in his east-coast debut as a potential candidate for the Republican Party's presidential nomination at the Cooper Institute, he identified these figures with the "thirty-nine" men who signed their names to the Federal Constitution.[1] That included, pre-eminently George Washington. But that category had special room for James Madison and Alexander Hamilton, since there are at least seven moments in the *Federalist Papers* (in Federalist nos. 1, 22, 29, 43, 49 and 50) to which Lincoln may be alluding in his writings and remarks. And in some senses, he saw himself as bridging a gap between the political and economic crises of his time and the entire revolutionary generation. "Theirs was the task (and nobly they performed it) to possess …this goodly land," Lincoln said in his first major public address in 1838, "and to uprear upon its hills and its valleys, a political edifice of liberty and equal rights." The task of his generation was "to transmit these…unprofaned by the foot of an invader" and "undecayed by the lapse of time…to the latest generation that fate shall permit the world to know." Like so much of the Enlightenment's historical theory, Lincoln shared the general fear that even the highest achievements of statecraft were prey to declension and decay, and only by an effort to "recur to first principles" could Americans hope to maintain the original shape of the American experiment. If Lincoln could explain himself in only one sentence, it would be his determination to "turn this government back into the channel in which the framers of the Constitution originally placed it."[2]

To none of the founders (or *framers*, or *fathers*) did Lincoln acknowledge as great and as explicit a debt as he did to Thomas Jefferson. He might praise George Washington as "the mightiest name of earth—long since mightiest in the cause of civil liberty; still mightiest in moral reformation." But it was Jefferson he singled out in 1859 (in a letter to Henry Pierce and the organizers of a Jefferson "festival" in Boston) as the author of "the definitions and axioms of free society."

1 Lucas E. Morel, *Lincoln and the American Founding* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2020), 21; Lincoln, "Address at Cooper Institute, New York City" (February 27, 1860), in *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. R.P. Basler et al (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 3:522.

2 Lincoln, "Speech at Chicago, Illinois" (July 10, 1858), in *CW*, 2:501; Garry Wills, *Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words That Remade America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 88.

All honor to Jefferson—to the man who, in the concrete pressure of a struggle for national independence by a single people, had the coolness, forecast, and capacity to introduce into a merely revolutionary document, an abstract truth, applicable to all men and all times, and so to embalm it there, that to-day, and in all coming days, it shall be a rebuke and a stumbling block to the very harbingers of re-appearing tyranny and oppression.[3]

Lincoln does not leave us a track of footnotes which will tell us how much of Jefferson's writings he read, or what editions and from what editors and publishers. But it is not hard to find literary bits of Jefferson surfacing at unusual points in Lincoln's surviving speeches, papers and letters. In 1791, Jefferson warned that Alexander Hamilton's proposals for a national bank would spell doom to the Constitution, since "to take a single step beyond the boundaries thus specially drawn around the powers of Congress is to take possession of a boundless field of power." Seventy-two years later, it is difficult not to believe that this was what was echoing in Lincoln's mind when he rebuked his over-eager Treasury Secretary, Salmon Portland Chase, for proposals about emancipation: "Would I not thus give up all footing upon constitution or law? Would I not thus be in the boundless field of absolutism?" And in the 1860 Cooper Institute speech, Lincoln called explicitly upon Jefferson's hope that "it is still in our power to direct the process of emancipation…in such slow degrees, as that the evil will wear off insensibly…."[4]

It was, however, the Declaration of Independence which Lincoln revered as the storehouse of those "definitions and axioms of free society," and he did not hesitate to say on the eve of his inauguration in 1861 that he had "never had a feeling politically that did not spring from the sentiments embodied in the Declaration of Independence." From the moment he had emerged on the national stage as a fierce critic of legalized slavery, he made Jefferson's Declaration the touchstone of his authority for opposition to the extension of slavery and, indeed, of slavery itself. In his great Peoria speech on October 16, 1854, Lincoln contrasted the "despotism" of slavery with "our Declaration of Independence," where self-government and consent are exhibited as "the leading principle—the sheet anchor of American republicanism." The partisans of slavery were those who wanted "cancel and tear to pieces" the Declaration. In 1856, he declared that the "practical equality of all men" in the Declaration was "the 'central idea' in our political public opinion." Lincoln attacked the Supreme Court's notorious Dred Scott decision in 1857 for having disregarded "that notable instrument" and its announcement that "all men" were "created equal—equal in 'certain inalienable rights, among which are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.'" No wonder Lincoln could laud Jefferson as the man "who was, is, and will perhaps continue to be, the most distinguished politician in our history." No wonder, either, that when Lincoln chose at Gettysburg to identify the single proposition

3 Lincoln, "Temperance Address" (February 22, 1842) and "To Henry L. Pierce and Others" (April 6, 1859), in *CW*, 1:279, 3:374-6; Morel, *Lincoln and the American Founding*, 107; Richard Brookhiser, *Founders' Son: A Life of Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Basic Books, 2014), 140-1. On the Jefferson's birthday "festival," see "Jefferson's Birthday," *Boston Evening Transcript* (April 2, 1859); its participants included many of luminaries of Northern Republicanism, including George Boutwell, John Andrew, Carl Schurz and Henry Wilson. Lincoln's letter explained to Pierce that his schedule prevented his attending, but his letter was noted in the *Boston Evening Transcript*'s coverage of the festival on April 14th. The letter was printed in the *Burlington Free Press* (April 15, 1859), the *Chicago Tribune* (April 18, 1859), the *Wisconsin State Journal* (April 18, 1859), the *Lancaster Examiner* (April 20, 1859), and in Lincoln's hometown newspaper, the *Illinois State Journal*, on April 20, 1859 ("Jefferson's Birthday—Letter from Mr. Lincoln").

4 Jefferson, "Opinion Against the Constitutionality of a National Bank" (February 15, 1791), in *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. H.A. Washington (New York: Derby & Jackson, 1859), 7:556; Lincoln, "Address at Cooper Institute" (February 27, 1861) and "To Salmon P. Chase" (September 2, 1863), in CW, 3:541, 6:429; Henry S. Randall, *The Life of Thomas Jefferson* (New York: Derby & Jackson, 1858), 1:227.

over which the Civil War was being waged, he did not hesitate to identify it as Jefferson's: *that all men are created equal*.[5]

The great Lincoln student, Harry Jaffa, once remarked that "Abraham Lincoln looked to Jefferson more than to anyone else for his understanding of the American Revolution"—although it has to be said that this is true for the points on which we are most likely today to fault Jefferson as it is for those on which we still praise him.[6] Jefferson's ultimate solution for the problem of slavery, if there was to be one at all, was the deportation of the black slaves who would be emancipated. "I have seen no proposition so expedient... as that of emancipation of those born after a given day, and of their education and expatriation at a proper age." He was convinced—at least publicly, though not in private—that "amalgamation with the other color produces a degradation to which, no lover of his country, no lover of excellence in the human character, can innocently consent." Besides, the "deep rooted prejudices entertained by the whites" together with "ten thousand recollections, by the black, of the injuries they have sustained" made deportation the only way to head off "the extermination of the one or the other race." [7]

For much of his career, Lincoln did not disagree. In 1854, he admitted that his "first impulse would be to free all the slaves, and send them to Liberia, to their own native land" (although he immediately added that he had doubts "that whatever of high hope...there may be in this, in the long run, its sudden execution is impossible"). Colonization remained for Lincoln a "wise project" for dealing with the end of slavery, as much in his mind for the freedmen as for white society. "Your race are suffering, in my judgment, the greatest wrong inflicted on any people," Lincoln told a delegation of black leaders in 1862, "but on this broad continent, not a single man of your race is made the equal of a single man of ours.... It is better for us both, there-fore, to be separated." Some of Lincoln's colonization talk was sugar-coating to his larger project for emancipation and abolition, but he did not entirely turn his back on the "hideous and barbarous humbug" (as John Hay called it) until the failure of a colonization experiment at Île-à-Vache, off the southern coast of Haiti, in 1864.[8]

Along with that, Jefferson anticipated the clearing and settling of the now-slaveless land of the West with white immigrants, and the replacement by them of the native tribes that populated the north American continent. Jefferson liked to speak of, and to, native leaders as brothers and children, and in some contexts he would even concede that they were "in body and mind equal to the white man." Still, the state constitution he helped write in 1776 asserted the sovereignty of Virginia over what he called (in the Declaration) "merciless Indian Savages," and he was

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5 Lincoln, "Speech at Peoria, Illinois" (October 16, 1854), Speech at a Republican Banquet, Chicago, Illinois" (December 10, 1856), "Speech at Springfield, Illinois" (June 26, 1857), "Speech in Independence Hall" (February 22, 1861), in *CW*, 2:266, 385, 406, 4:240; Lincoln, in Henry Clay Whitney, *Life on the Circuit With Lincoln* (Boston: Estes & Lauriat, 1892), 216; Douglas L. Wilson, "Lincoln's Declaration," in *Lincoln before Washington: New Perspectives on the Illinois Years* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 166-70, 178; Richard N. Current, "The Lincoln Presidents," in *Speaking of Abraham Lincoln: The Man and His Meaning for Our Times* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983), 138; Michael Lind, *What Lincoln Believed: The Values and Convictions of America's Greatest President* (New York: Doubleday, 2004), 103; Brookhiser, *Founders' Son*, 165..

6 Harry V. Jaffa, *A New Birth of Freedom: Abraham Lincoln and the Coming of the Civil War* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), 6-7.

7 Jefferson, in Randall, *Life of Thomas Jefferson*, 3:644; Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (London: John Stockdale, 1787), 229.

8 Lincoln, "Speech at Peoria, Illinois" (October 16, 1854), "Speech at Edwardsville, Illinois" (September 11, 1858), "Annual Message to Congress" (December 3, 1861) and "Address on Colonization to a Deputation of Negroes" (August 14, 1862), in CW 3:15, 93, 5:48, 371-2; Hay, diary entry for July 1, 1864, in *Inside Lincoln's White House: The Complete Civil War Diary of John Hay*, eds. M. Burlingame & J.R.T. Ettlinger (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1997), 217, Current, *Speaking of Abraham Lincoln*, 22.

confident that they would gradually be pressed further and further west, and further and further out-of-sight, and as president in 1809, he did not mind warning tribal leaders that any "unprovoked war" they waged against the United States" would be the cause for his government to "extirpate" them "from the face of the earth, or drive to such a distance as that they shall never be able to strike us."[9]

Lincoln does not offer much of a contrast. The most oft-told tale in the extended Lincoln family was of the murder of Lincoln's grandfather by a presumably-Shawnee warrior while clearing land in Kentucky in the mid-1780s. Later, he participated as an Illinois militia captain and scout in the Black Hawk War of 1832, although without seeing combat. Until his presidency, his contacts and thinking on native policy were tangential at best. But once elected president, Lincoln could not avoid dealing with these issues, and he did so in ways that did not differ substantively from Jefferson's line of thinking. When a delegation of tribal chiefs visited Lincoln in 1861, he addressed them in a childish pidgin—"Where live now? When go back Iowa?"—and when another delegation of "nine chiefs of different nations" in the federal territories "asked the President to counsel his white children, who were annually encroaching more and more upon their tribes, to abstain from acts of violence and wrong towards them," Lincoln merely replied that he would "endeavor to have satisfactory treaties made with them." At the same time, he added, "there is no way in which your race is to become as numerous and prosperous as the white race except by living as they do, by the cultivation of the earth." When a Sioux uprising erupted in Minnesota in 1862, federal troops suppressed it ruthlessly, and though Lincoln claimed that "if we get through this war, and I live, this Indian system shall be reformed," he still signed the death warrants for thirty-eight of the 307 Sioux who had been tried and condemned to death by a military tribunal.[10]

Yet there is another strand in the relationship of Lincoln and Jefferson, this time one of the most serious disapproval and disavowal, and it shows very plainly at a moment long past Lincoln's death in 1865. Lincoln's long-time law partner, William Henry Herndon, aspired to write a magisterial biography of Lincoln, and in 1866 he embarked on an ambitious campaign of interviews and letter-queries to gather information on Lincoln's early life, before he and Herndon met. It is not clear what stimulated him to write to one Theodore F. Dwight in December, 1866, but it is likely it was something which had stuck in Herndon's memory about Lincoln and Jefferson. Was not Theodore Dwight, Herndon asked, the "son of the Theo Dwight that wrote a severe criticism of Jefferson?" Herndon wanted to know because Herndon had read the book when it was advertised for sale in Lincoln's (and Herndon's) hometown of Springfield, Illinois, in 1840, then handed it to

9 Jefferson to the Marquis de Chastellux (June 7, 1785), in *Memoir, Correspondence, and Miscellanies from the Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. T.J. Randolph (Charlottesville, VA: F. Carr, 1829), 1:230; Jefferson, "To the Chiefs of the Wyandots, Ottawas, Chippewas, Powtewatamies and Shawanese" (January 10, 1809), in *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. H.A. Washington (Washington: Taylor & Maury, 1854), 8:234; Peter Onuf, *Jefferson's Empire: The Language of American Nationhood* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000), 24-5.

10 John Hay, diary entry for April 30, 1861, in *Inside Lincoln's White House*, ed. Burlingame, 14; "The President and the Wild Indians," *Washington Evening Star* (March 27, 1863); "Grand Council of Indians," *Washington National Republican (March 27, 1863)*; *Charles H. Coleman, "Lincoln's Lincoln Grandmother," Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society 52 (Spring 1959), 79; Herndon's Lincoln, eds. D.L. Wilson & R.O. Davis*, 20; *Burrus Carnahan, "Lincoln and the 1862 Minnesota Sioux Trials," Lincoln Lore 1934 (Summer 2022), 8-9; Christopher W. Anderson, "Native Americans and the Origin of Abraham Lincoln's Views on Race," Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association 37 (Winter 2016)*, 11-29; *Lind, What Lincoln Believed*, 73, 84-7, 88, 296; *Duane Schultz, Over the Earth I Come: The Great Sioux Uprising of 1862 (New York: St. Martin's Press*, 1992), 253, 259, 275, *Andrew F. Lang, A Contest of Civilizations: Exposing the Crisis of American Exceptionalism in the Civil War Era (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press*, 2021), 227, *and Burlingame, Abraham Lincoln: A Life*, 2:483.

Lincoln, who "read it." "It had a powerful impression on his mind." The impression was, in fact, all bad. "Mr. Lincoln never liked Jefferson's moral character after that reading," Herndon added.[11]

Jefferson and Lincoln represented a radical dualism in their visions of America, a dualism which remains still at the heart of American politics.

Theodore Frelinghuysen Dwight was not, as it turned out, the son of the Theodore Dwight who had written *The Character of Thomas Jefferson, as Exhibited in His Own Writing* in 1839. *That* Theodore Dwight was the Massachusetts arch-Federalist and grandson of Jonathan Edwards who roasted Jefferson as a deceitful politician with no "regard for the constitution if his interests or his policy were in danger of being injured," and who was a "secret and malignant enemy" of George Washington. However, it was not Dwight's political *exposé* of Jefferson which drove Lincoln over the line as much as it was Lincoln's reading of other stories about Jefferson which had been in circulation even before Dwight's book, that Jefferson had enjoyed a sexual liaison with one of his slaves, that he "dreamt of freedom in a slave's embrace," that he "brought his own children to the hammer, and made money of his debaucheries," and that "a daughter of this vaunted champion of democracy was sold some years ago at a public auction in New Orleans." These were the charges associated with Jefferson's long relationship with Sally Hemmings, and the appearance of it was repulsive enough to Lincoln for it to become the subject of a speech sometime in 1844 or 1845. When the *Chicago Times* exhumed this report in 1860, in an attempt to damage Lincoln's standing with Democratic voters, Lincoln was quick to deny that he had ever "used any such language in any speech *at any time*." But Herndon suspected otherwise. "Mr. Lincoln hated Thomas Jefferson as a man," he confided to Ward Hill Lamon in 1870, not to mention "as a politician."[12]

Whatever else Lincoln was, he was a perfect Victorian bourgeois, morally scrupulous to the last degree, and with no tolerance for sexual canoodling. Herndon remembered that "Mr Lincoln had a strong if not a terrible passion for women," yet "his idea was that a woman had the same right to play with her tail that a man had and no more nor less and that he had no moral or other right to violate the sacred marriage vow." Nor was this the only point on which Lincoln drew broad lines between himself and Jefferson. Jefferson had a wine cellar, and insisted that "if I should fail in the means of getting" a particular pale sherry, "it will be a privation which I shall feel sensibly once a day"; Lincoln was practically a teetotaler who shunned alcohol "because I hate the stuff… It is unpleasant to me and always makes me feel flabby and undone." Lincoln was born into hard-scrabble rural poverty; Jefferson was the offspring of the landed Piedmont gentry. Lincoln had less than a year of formal schooling; Jefferson enjoyed classical schooling from the age of five, plus two years at the

11 Herndon to Theodore F. Dwight (December 30, 1866), in *Herndon on Lincoln: Letters*, eds. D.L. Wilson & R.O. Davis (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2016), 65.

12 Dwight, *The Character of Thomas Jefferson, as Exhibited in His Own Writings* (Boston: Weeks, Jordan, 1839), 113, 125; "A Bold Forgery," *Illinois State Journal* (September 6, 1860); Herndon to Lamon (March 3, 1870), in *Herndon on Lincoln: Letters*, 94; Lind, *What Lincoln Believed*, 103. See Lincoln's response to Anson Chester (September 5, 1860) and to James H. Reed (October 1, 1860), CW, 4:111, 124, and the reprint of the charge in the anti-Lincoln *Freeport Weekly Bulletin* (September 6, 1860), the Rock Island Argus (September 10, 1860), the *Ottawa Free Trader* (September 22, 1860), and the *Jonesboro Gazette* (September 22, 1860).

College of William and Mary. Both were voracious readers, and paid attention to at least one classical writer in common, which was Euclid. Lincoln had "studied and nearly mastered the "Six books of Euclid" by 1850, and Jefferson confessed to a passion for "Tacitus and Thuycidides, for Newton and Euclid." (And perhaps it was no accident that when Lincoln spoke of Jefferson's formulating the "definitions and axioms of free society," he was using the language of Euclidean geometry, since "definitions" and "axioms" are what stand at the head of editions of Euclid in the textbooks of the 1840s, *definitions* being descriptions of objects and *axioms* being irrefutable givens concerning those definitions). But Lincoln was not the kind of passionate library rat that Jefferson was, and though he read more widely than he was given credit for by later biographers, Herndon thought that Lincoln "read less and thought more than any man in his sphere in America."[13]

But the gap between the upwardly-mobile bourgeois striver and the elegant patrician ran deeper than cultural divergence, for at the most profound level of political ideology, Jefferson and Lincoln represented a radical dualism in their visions of America, a dualism which remains still at the heart of American politics. In the most obvious sense, Jefferson spoke of an equality which sat blandly alongside the ownership of slaves; Lincoln, by contrast, could not imagine anything less that the complete and unavoidable destruction of the one by the other. "I am naturally anti-slavery," Lincoln claimed in 1864. "If slavery is not wrong, nothing is wrong. I cannot remember when I did not so think, and feel." Jefferson also parted ways with Lincoln in terms of the direction of history: Lincoln, like Giambattista Vico, was a preservationist who feared that the American republic would not be immune to the cyclical turns of decay; Jefferson, like Edward Gibbon, had greater confidence in the continuous upward movement of ideas and society, and believed that "I shall not die without the hope that light and liberty are on a steady advance" and that "improvement in the moral and intellectual condition of Man" was irresistible. "The flames kindled on the 4th of July 1776 have spread over too much of the globe to be extinguished." Both Lincoln and Jefferson were only dimly religious, but Lincoln was far more inclined to employ religious language and applaud religious sentiments than Jefferson. And again: Jefferson conceived of the federal union as a "compact," and in the set of resolutions he wrote for the Kentucky legislature to protest the Adams administration in 1798, he ventured far enough beyond the logic of a "compact" to suggest that any "abuse of the delegated powers" in the Constitution by the federal government could be met with "a nullification of the act" as the "rightful remedy" and "to nullify of their own authority all assumptions of powers by others within their limits." This, Lincoln regarded with little better than horror. "To drive out the visible authority of the Federal Union" was, in Lincoln's estimate, tantamount to forcing "it to immediate dissolution." No government, and certainly not the Constitution of the United States, ever

13 Herndon to James H. Wilson (September 23, 1889) and Jesse W. Weik (February 5, 1887 & January 23, 1890), in *Herndon on Lincoln: Letters*, 229, 307, 310; Jefferson to Joseph Yznardi (May 10, 1803), in *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Barbara Oberg (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 40:356; 7, 9; Lincoln, "Autobiography Written for John L. Scripps" (June 1860), in *CW*, 4:62; Jefferson to John Adams (January 21, 1812) in *The Adams-Jefferson Letters: The Complete Correspondence Between Thomas Jefferson and Abigail and John Adams*, ed. L.J. Cappon (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1959), 291; John Playfair, *Elements of Geometry: Containing the First Six Books of Euclid* (Edinburgh: Bell & Bradfute, 1804), 1, 5, and D. McCurdy, *Euclid's Elements* (New York: Collins, Brother, 1846), Herndon, in Francis B. Carpenter, *Six Months at the White House with Abraham Lincoln: The Story of a Picture* (New York: Hurd & Houghton, 1866), 331; Wilson, "The Frigate and the Frugal Chariot," in *Lincoln Before Washington*, 4-14; Drew R. McCoy, An 'Old-Fashioned' Nationalism: Lincoln, Jefferson, and the Classical Tradition" and Glenn LaFantasie, "Lincoln, Euclid, and the Satisfaction of Success," *JALA* 23 (Winter 2002), 61, and 41 (Winter 2020), 25-26.

sanctions its own destruction. "It is safe to assert that no government proper, ever had a provision in its organic law for its own termination." But standing idly by while factions, states and regions decide what parts of the federal laws they will obey would do exactly that, and thus "practically put an end to free government upon the earth." The spirit of Jeffersonian nullification "recognizes no fidelity to the Constitution, no obligation to maintain the Union; and…is…treason in effect."[14]

But the most crucial divide between Lincoln and Jefferson arrived when they considered the very purpose of the American republic. "On the side of the Union," Lincoln said, in the message he sent to the special session of the new Thirty-Seventh Congress at the outbreak of the Civil War, "is a struggle for maintaining in the world, that form, and substance of government, whose leading object is, to elevate the condition of men— to lift artificial weights from all shoulders— to clear the paths of laudable pursuit for all— to afford all, an unfettered start, and a fair chance, in the race of life." But describing life as a "race" on "paths of laudable pursuit" implied an economic diversity and dynamism in American life from which Thomas Jefferson shrank. The independence Jefferson (and the Continental Congress) declared in 1776 was political, but it had more than a few heavy economic overtones. The British imperial overlords had sought to make Americans economically dependent on the imperial system, whether through the wool they spun or the tea they drank. In Jefferson's mind, American independence meant freedom from dependency on the British imperial system; indeed, the genuinely free citizen was one who owed no dependence on anyone, because "dependence" produces "subservience and venality, suffocates the germ of virtue, and prepares fit tools for the designs of ambition."[15]

The perfect models of independence, in Jefferson's mind, were self-sufficient farmers, who grew what they ate, tended what clothed them, and hewed the wood they used for building and heating. "Those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever he had a chosen people, whose breasts he has made his peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue," Jefferson wrote in 1785. "Cultivators of the earth are the most virtuous and independent citizens." By contrast, those who labored in cities and in manufacturing were dealing in illusory forms of wealth—bills of exchange, cash, credit—and subordinating themselves to moneyed masters whose rule would be as onerous as that of the British. "While we have land to labor then, let us never wish to see our citizens occupied at a work-bench, or twirling a distaff." When "several merchants from Richmond (Scotch, English &c)" showed up in Philadelphia in 1791, he sneered at them for their hope "to dabble in federal filth."[16] But the downside of this agrarian paradise was that it was also entirely static: no one moved up or down, because there was nothing to power them up or down. And that had the added advantage of guaranteeing that an important component of the agrarian workforce in America—namely, African slaves—were never seen as deserving an opportunity to better their lives, and guaranteeing as well that the only way for newcomers and new generations to acquire

14 Lincoln, "First Inaugural Address—Final Text" (March 4, 1861), "Message to Congress in Special Session" (July 4, 1861) and "To Albert G. Hodges" (April 4, 1864), in *CW*, 4:263, 425-6, 428, 7:281; Jefferson, "Kentucky Resolutions of 1798" (October 4, 1798) and to John Adams (September 12, 1821), in *Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, 17:489-91 and 30:547; Harry V. Jaffa, *Crisis of the House Divided: An Interpretation of the Issues in the Lincoln-Douglas Debates* (New York: Doubleday, 1959), 239; Brookhiser, *Founders' Son*, 144; Lind, What Lincoln Believed, 21.

15 Lincoln, "Message to Congress in Special Session" (July 4, 1861), in *CW* 4:438; Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, 274-5.

16 Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, 274-5, 290; Jefferson to James Madison (July 24, 1791), in *The Papers of James Madison*, ed. R.A. Rutland & T.A. Mason (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1983) 14:56.

agrarian independence was an inevitable push westwards, into confrontation with the tribes and the New World's remaining colonial powers.

What Jefferson blessed as agrarian stability struck others as stagnation, and the cure for stagnation would be an economic mobility that used the dynamism of markets, manufacturing and commerce as the ladders for self-improvement. This was what animated the politics of Jefferson's deadly rival, Alexander Hamilton, a propertyless immigrant from the West Indies who saw in trade precisely the opportunities for enrichment and self-transformation that Jefferson dreaded as threats to the stability of agrarian independence. "A prosperous commerce is now perceived and acknowledged...to be the most useful, as well as the most productive, source of national wealth," Hamilton insisted, and he devoted his service as Secretary of the Treasury in the Washington administration to promoting a national bank (to stimulate investment and development), manufacturing, and tariffs (to protect that manufacturing from British competition).[17] A generation later, the debate over policy and economics was still raging, only now championed by Andrew Jackson on the Jeffersonian side and Henry Clay on the Hamiltonian one. And Henry Clay had no more admiring disciple than Abraham Lincoln.

Precisely because Lincoln had been born with no silver spoon in his mouth or land title in his hand, he thirsted for the opportunity to move beyond the boundaries of his father's rude cabin and what he later described as "the back side of this world." The young Lincoln left his father's farm as soon as he was legally entitled to, and never looked back; he opened a store, which failed, and then a second store, which also failed, and then became a lawyer, a profession which (in the illuminating phrase of Charles Sellers) was the advance guard of commerce. His autobiography became a standing rebuke to an immobile Jeffersonian agrarianism: "Twenty-five years ago, I was a hired laborer. The hired laborer of yesterday, labors on his own account to-day; and will hire others to labor for him to-morrow. Advancement—improvement in condition—is the order of things in a society of equals." It was this, also, which fueled Lincoln's hostility to slavery; for what else was slavery but the final word in stagnation, of hopelessness? "I want every man to have the chance" for self-improvement, Lincoln said on his speaking tour of New England in 1860,

> *and I believe a black man is entitled to it—in which he can better his condition—when he may look forward and hope to be a hired laborer this year and the next, work for himself afterward, and finally to hire men to work for him! That is the true system.*[18]

Lincoln (like Hamilton and Clay) dreamt of a world in which Americans would embark on a constant project of economic empowerment. And that project would take the form, in Lincoln's hands, of what Henry Clay called his "American System": national banks, to create a uniform system of currency; infrastructure (or "internal improvements") to bring markets to consumers and make even farmers participants in vast networks of exchange; and high protective tariffs. As much as we think of Lincoln's presidency in terms of winning the Civil War, we should also think of it terms of a domestic agenda whose target was the entire Jeffersonian economy as much as it was slavery. And it was this which drove Lincoln's administration, even through the years of civil war, to create a national banking system, a

17 Hamilton, No. 12 "The Utility of the Union in Respect to Revenue," in *The Federalist*, eds. G.W. Carey & J. McClellan (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund), 2001), 55.

18 Charles Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1846* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 47; James Cornelius, "Rev. Noyes W. Miner, 1881-82," *JALA* 44 (Spring 2024), 51; Lincoln, "Fragment on Free Labor" (September 17, 1859) and "Speech at New Haven, Connecticut" (March 6, 1860), in *CW*, 3:462, 4:24-5.

transcontinental railroad, and the highest protective tariff rates in American history.

There is no simple mirror in which we can expect Lincoln to look and see Thomas Jefferson. Lincoln and Jefferson are separated by significant gulfs of style, both in action and in words. Lincoln was "always a Whig in politics," and behind that, a Hamiltonian who never subscribed to a compact theory of the Union, and who had no investment in the "magical omnipotence of states' rights." On the other hand, Lincoln will make an appeal to 'the better angels of our nature" not unlike Jefferson's appeal that "we are all republicans, we are all federalists," and he will not balk any more than Jefferson did at exercising broad executive power.[19] They continue to hover over our historical consciousness, sometimes overlapping, but sometimes also pointing to two very different ideas of America and democracy.

Yet, as his praise of Jefferson's "axioms" reminds us, there is clearly an appropriation of Jefferson, and not entirely as a cynical political maneuver. Not only for Lincoln but for Lincoln's generation, Thomas Jefferson remained a commanding and authoritative figure. Jefferson marched alongside Washington through the schoolbooks of Lincoln's generation; Jefferson's name was attached to cities, towns and counties in over twenty states; and Lincoln had learned, from his earliest school lessons, how

> *Nash, Rutledge, Jefferson, in council great*
> *And Jay and Laurens op'd the rolls of fate.*[20]

Whoever controlled the appeal to Jefferson wielded a significant political weapon for commanding assent, and no one liked making that appeal more than Lincoln's great rival in the 1850s, Stephen A. Douglas, the most influential figure among Jefferson's heirs in the Democratic party. In 1858, when Lincoln challenged Douglas for the senior Illinois senatorial seat, he was conscious that his fellow Republicans were a minority party in Illinois. To win, he would have to pull white Illinois Democrats who were uncomfortable with the prospect of slavery extending itself into the American West (where many of them were hoping to find new homes and new starts) to the Republican column, and it seemed clear to Lincoln that one way to do that was to wrest Jefferson out of Douglas's hands, and to make it clear that Jefferson's sympathies would have lain with Lincoln and the Republicans rather than with the sorry mess that Jefferson's heirs had made of his party and legacy.[21]

In the contest with Douglas, Illinois Republicans flocked gleefully to the banner of Jefferson. "Let it be observed," whooped the Illinois State Republican Committee, "that while Thomas Jefferson and the fathers of the Republic proposed to prohibit slavery in the Territories only, and while the Republican party of today propose no more and no less, Stephen A. Douglas sought, in 1845, to prohibit it in the States, even though the people wanted it!" Lincoln joined vigorously in the whooping. When Douglas tried to attack Lincoln on the standing of the Dred Scott decision, Lincoln replied that "Mr. Jefferson and General Jackson were both against him on the binding political authority of Supreme Court decisions." And in the campaign, Jefferson's doubts about the

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19 Anastaplo, *Abraham Lincoln: A Constitutional Biography*, 337; Lind, What Lincoln Believed, 23, 30, 162; Jaffa, New Birth of Freedom, 61; Douglas L. Wilson, *Lincoln's Sword: The Presidency and the Power of Words* (New York: Knopf, 2006), 61; Mackubin Thomas Owens, "Abraham Lincoln as War President," in Lucas Morel, ed., *Lincoln and Liberty: Wisdom for the Ages* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2014), 241.

20 Mark Monmonier, *Mapping It Out: Expository Cartography for the Humanities and Social Sciences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 84; Joel Barlow, "Description of the First American Congress; from the Vision of Columbus," in Caleb Bingham, *The Columbian Orator: Containing a Variety of Original and Selected Pieces* (New York: E. Duyckinck, 1816), 133.

21 Lincoln made this connection as early as his campaign speeches for John Charles Fremont in 1856, when he claimed that "the Republicans are walking in the 'old paths'... of Washington, Jefferson and others." Lincoln, "Speech at Vandalia, Illinois" (September 23, 1856), in CW, 2:378; David S. Reynolds, *Abe: Abraham Lincoln In His Times* (New York: Penguin, 2020), 177.

justice of slavery became a heavy stick with which Lincoln beat Douglas. "I will remind Judge Douglas and this audience, that while Mr. Jefferson was the owner of slaves…'he trembled for his country when he remembered that God was just;' and I will offer the highest premium in my power to Judge Douglas if he will show that he, in all his life, ever uttered a sentiment at all akin to that of Jefferson." How did Douglas reconcile the Declaration of Independence, and its proclamation of equality, with human slavery? "Are Jeffersonian Democrats willing to have the gem taken from the magna charta of human liberty in this shameful way?" Lincoln asked. "Will they maintain that its declaration of equality of natural rights among all nations is correct?" Did Douglas have a better plan for containing the spread of slavery than Jefferson? "I believe if we could arrest the spread, and place it where Washington, and Jefferson, and Madison placed it, it would be in the course of ultimate extinction."[22]

The authority of Thomas Jefferson was, admittedly, a peculiar cloak in which Lincoln wrapped himself, but, as he explained in 1859, it was a peculiarity he had observed in several other odd cases that reminded him of the state of the country. "I remember," he told Henry Pierce in the "axioms" letter,

> *once being much amused at seeing two partially intoxicated men engage in a fight with their great coats on, which fight, after a long, and rather harmless contest, ended in each having fought himself out of his own coat, and into that of the other. If the two leading parties of this day are really identical with the two in the days of Jefferson and Adams, they have performed about the same feat as the two drunken men.*

But Lincoln also borrowed the mantle of Jefferson because the words of the Declaration of Independence really were, for Lincoln and for the America he envisioned, "our ancient faith."

And not ours alone; Lincoln infused a broader meaning into Jefferson's own words than even Jefferson might have encouraged. "Perhaps half our people," Lincoln said at the opening of the debates with Douglas in 1858, have come from someplace else in the world, and have no descent from, or connection with, the revolutionary generation.

> *But when they look through that old Declaration of Independence they find that those old men say that 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal,' and then they feel that that moral sentiment taught in that day evidences their relation to those men, that it is the father of all moral principle in them, and that they have a right to claim it as though they were blood of the blood, and flesh of the flesh of the men who wrote that Declaration, and so they are.*[23]

Lincoln saw in Jefferson's Declaration a universalism that Jefferson himself seems, at best, to have only dimly glimpsed. As much, then, as Lincoln and Jefferson diverged on every other point of real political importance, on the fundamental principle of that universal equality they really did speak with one voice, and to our times as much as to their own. ▲

22 *Political Record of Stephen A. Douglas on the Slavery Question* (Illinois Republican State Central Committee, 1860), 1; Jaffa, *Crisis of the House Divided*, 111; Lincoln, "Fragment: Notes for Speeches" (August 21, 1858), "First Debate with Stephen A. Douglas at Ottawa, Illinois" (August 21, 1858), "Speech at Carlinville, Illinois" (August 31, 1858) "Fifth Debate with Stephen A. Douglas, at Galesburg, Illinois" (October 7, 1858), in CW, 2:551, 3:18, 79, 220; Current, "The Lincoln Presidents," 129; Anastaplo, "The Lincoln-Douglas Debates," in *Abraham Lincoln: A Constitutional Biography*, 173.

23 Lincoln, "Speech at Chicago, Illinois" (July 10, 1858) and "To Henry L. Pierce and Others" (April 6, 1859), in CW, 2:499-500, 3:375; Jaffa, *Crisis of the House Divided*, 321, and *New Birth of Freedom*, 20, 21.