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“His Second Beau Ideal of Statesman?”: The Invocation of Thomas Jefferson in Abraham Lincoln’s Political Career¹

On February 12, 1809 a frontier couple living in a small log cabin on the obscure Sinking Spring Farm in Hardin County, Kentucky had a visit from the stork. The parents named the infant Abraham, after his grandfather. The little Abraham Lincoln, as he was this new member of the family of modest means, seemed to be destined for hard physical agricultural labor through his life. It was much more than the, then-considerable, 500-mile distance that separated him from the White House in Washington, D.C. His life, however, was to take a different course.

In the very same February, the occupant of the Executive Mansion was getting ready to pack his things and leave Washington, D.C. for good. As his second term of presidency was coming to an end, Thomas Jefferson was more than happy to return to his safe haven estate in Monticello. As he wrote in his letter to French expatriate Pierre Samuel du Pont de Nemours: “Within a few days I retire to my family, my books and farms; and having gained the harbor myself, I shall look on my friends still buffeting the storm, with anxiety indeed, but not with envy.”²

Of course, Jefferson, the principal author of the Declaration of Independence, made his name into the great books of American history. He was to become the hero of many Americans in the upcoming generation, among them the young Lincoln, who discovered his lifetime heroes very soon: George Washington (one of his favorite readings was Parson Weems’ *Biography of George Washington*), Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson.³ Later, as President-elect, he recalled the impact of “all the accounts [...] given of the battlefields, and struggles for the liberties of the

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2 Thomas Jefferson to Pierre Samuel du Pont de Nemours, March 2, 1809: B. L. Rayner, *Sketches of the Life, Writings, and Opinions of Thomas Jefferson*. New York, 1832. 491.

3 Oates, Stephen B., *With Malice Towards None: A Life of Abraham Lincoln*. New York, 1994. 11.

country” had on him then.⁴ His stepmother Sarah Bush Johnston Lincoln recalled: “Abe read all the books he could lay his hands on.”⁵ Similarly to Jefferson, Lincoln kept a notebook of his early readings. When the family moved to Indiana in 1816, Abraham had a somewhat easier access to books. It was then that he read his first law book which had the text of the Declaration of Independence in the appendix: it became “his political chart and inspiration”, as his White House secretary, John Nicolay put it.⁶

When he moved to Illinois, he soon excelled both as a prairie lawyer and a frontier politician. When he was elected to the Illinois House of Representatives, he soon got entangled in the debates surrounding reforming the system of education. In the Illinois General Education Convention he advocated universal free elementary education and what he outlined was an unmistakably Jeffersonian program for education: it is most likely that one of Lincoln’s most important models was Jefferson’s comprehensive system of public education for the Commonwealth of Virginia from 1779. In 1832 Lincoln wrote in the “Handbill to the People of Sangamo County”:

Upon the subject of education[...] I view it as the most important subject which we as a people can be engaged in. For my part, I desire to see the time when education, and by its means, morality, sobriety, enterprise and industry, shall become much more general than at present, and should be gratified to have it in my power to contribute something to the advancement of any measure which might have a tendency to accelerate the happy period.⁷

These are obviously Jeffersonian ideas: if people are educated, they can resist mental and physical oppression by any form of tyranny and only then would they become capable of safeguarding constitutional principles. This is a remarkable application of Jefferson’s concept of education by somebody whose formal education added up to 18 months at the most.

4 Address to the New Jersey State Senate. Trenton, New Jersey, February 21, 1861. Quoted in John M. Hay and John G. Nicolay, *Abraham Lincoln: A History*. Vol. III. New York, 2009. 297. [Hereinafter Hay-Nicolay, *Abraham Lincoln*]

5 Interview with Sarah Bush Lincoln. In. Douglas L. Wilson and Rodney O. Davis (eds.), *Herndon’s Informants: Letters, Interviews, and Statements About Abraham Lincoln*. Urbana, 1997, 107.

6 Quoted in Douglas L. Wilson, *Lincoln Before Washington: New Perspectives on the Illinois Years*. Urbana, 1997, 166.

7 Abraham Lincoln, To the People of Sangamo County, March 9, 1832. In. Roy P. Basler (ed.), *Lincoln Speeches and Writings, 1832-1858*. New York, 1984, 9. It is worth mentioning though that Jefferson’s bill was never passed.

As member of the Whig Party, Abraham Lincoln considered the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence as the quintessence of democracy and more and more frequently used them as points of reference in his political rhetoric. On January 27, 1838 he delivered a lecture entitled “The Perpetuation of Our Political Institutions” before the Young Men’s Lyceum at Springfield, Illinois in which he invoked Thomas Jefferson again:

As the patriots of seventy-six did to the support of the Declaration of Independence, so to the support of the Constitution and laws, let every American pledge his life, his property, and his sacred honor. Let every man remember that to violate the law is to trample on the blood of his father, and to tear the character of his own, and his children’s liberty. Let reverence for the laws, be breathed by every American mother, to the lisping babe that prattles on her lap. Let it be taught in schools, in seminaries, and in colleges. Let it be written in primers, spelling books, and in almanacs. Let it be preached from the pulpit, proclaimed in legislative halls, and enforced in courts of justice. And, in short, let it become the political religion of the nation; and let the old and the young, the rich and the poor, the grave and the gay, of all sexes and tongues, and colors and conditions, sacrifice unceasingly upon its altars.⁸

In this early phase of his political career, Lincoln laid heavy emphasis on the development of the Midwest in general and the state of Illinois in particular. The three major pillars of his political agenda were protectionist tariffs, corporate welfare subsidies for transportation (mainly railroad and canal-building) companies (usually referred to as “internal improvements”), and a government monopolization of the country’s money supply. This is what he jokingly called his politics, “short and sweet, like the old woman’s dance.”⁹

Regarding internal improvements Lincoln reached back to Jefferson at a later stage of his career as well. In his speech delivered before the House of Representatives on June 20, 1848, he quoted Jefferson who “in his message to Congress in 1806, recommended an amendment of the constitution, with a view to apply an anticipated surplus in the Treasury »to the great purposes of the public education, roads, rivers, canals, and such other objects of public improvements as it may be thought proper

8 Abraham Lincoln, *The Perpetuation of Our Political Institutions*, In. William J. Bennett and John T. E. Cribb, *The American Patriot’s Almanac*. Nashville, TN, 2008, 28.

9 For an excellent analysis see, Gabor S. Boritt, *Lincoln and the Economics of the American Dream*. Urbana, 1994.

to add to the constitutional enumeration of the federal powers.«”¹⁰ (It is interesting that once elected to Congress Lincoln frequented the congressional library, right across the street from the boardinghouse where he was staying. Many of the books in the possession of the library had actually belonged to Jefferson himself: the approximately 6,700 volumes of his library meant the foundation of the new congressional library after the British had burnt the original in 1814. It is quite likely that Lincoln read several of Jefferson's own books.)

These examples rather constitute exceptions in this early phase of Lincoln's career, however, as the young Whig rarely reached back to the political thoughts of Thomas Jefferson. This changed in the 1850s, however. The more and more sectionalized national politics, the heated debates over the future of the institution of slavery and the possibility of its territorial expansion offered a golden opportunity for Lincoln to give momentum to his stalling political career and step onto the stage of national politics. One of the first signs of his “political re-activation” was when he was asked to deliver the eulogy of Henry Clay, the renowned senator from Kentucky, Secretary of State between 1825 and 1829, to whom Lincoln referred to as his “beau ideal of statesman.”¹¹

Lincoln attended a lecture of Clay in 1847 and was impressed by his approach to the institution of slavery in the United States. Clay considered it an “evil institution” and clearly opposed its expansion to any of the newly-acquired territories (this was hotly debated during the Mexican War), at the same time, ruled out that the two races could co-exist peacefully as equals. His solution to this problem was colonization – the movement supporting the transportation of emancipated slaves “back” to what they considered their “mother continent” – Africa. Gradual emancipation was a crucial element of his plan he called the “American System”, but it was unachievable without avoiding the “amalgamation of races”, undesired by many.

Thomas Jefferson also gave much thought to this “benevolent” solution to the race problem and had arrived to the same conclusion as Clay: “Nothing is more certainly written in the book of fate, than that

10 Lincoln's Speech in the House of Representatives, June 20, 1848. Quoted in Ronald D. Rietveld, *Abraham Lincoln's George Washington*, In: Robert W. Watson (ed.) *White House Studies Compendium*, Vol. V. New York, 2008, 289.

11 Lincoln frequently used this reference to Clay. For an example see, First Debate with Stephen Douglas. Ottawa, IL. August 21, 1858. In: Don E. Fehrenbacher (ed.) *Lincoln: Speeches and Writings, 1832-1858*. New York: The Library of America, 1989), Volume I, 526. [Hereinafter *Lincoln: Speeches*]

these people are free; nor is it less certain that the two races, equally free, cannot live in the same government. Nature, habit, opinion, have drawn indelible lines of distinction between them.”¹² He even claimed to have found the perfect new home for the expatriated blacks: the West Indies.¹³

To a certain extent Lincoln followed the footsteps of both Jefferson and Clay. Probably no historian has summed this up as well as Eric Foner, whose monograph entitled *The Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln and American Slavery* won the 2011 Pulitzer Prize for history. He points out: “Lincoln’s thought seemed suspended between a ‘civic’ conception of American nationality, based on the universal principle of equality, and racial nationalism that saw blacks as in some ways not truly American. He found it impossible to imagine the United States as a biracial society.”¹⁴ Besides the advantages he considered obvious for the American society, he was convinced that the colonization scheme was to be highly beneficial for the African continent as well:

There is a moral fitness in the idea of returning to Africa her children, whose ancestors have been torn from her by the ruthless hand of fraud and violence. Transplanted in a foreign land, they will carry back to their native soil the rich fruits of religion, civilization, law and liberty. May it not be one of the great designs of the Ruler of the universe, (whose ways are often inscrutable by short-sighted mortals,) thus to transform an original crime, into a signal blessing to that most unfortunate portion of the globe?¹⁵

Lincoln held on to his support of colonization, primarily, because he could not offer any solution to the American society turning into a biracial one – an unavoidable consequence of doing away with the institution of slavery.¹⁶ He, however, was well aware of the limitations of the plan as well. As he put it in his often-quoted speech at Peoria, IL

12 Thomas Jefferson, Autobiography Draft Fragment (July 27, 1821). The Library of Congress. The Thomas Jefferson Papers Series 1. General Correspondence. 1651-1827.

13 For Jefferson and slavery see, Csaba Lévai, Discrimination and Tolerance: the Case of Thomas Jefferson and Slavery, In. Gudmundur Hálfðanarson (ed.) *Discrimination and Tolerance in Historical Perspective*. Pisa, 2009, 295-299.

14 Eric Foner, Lincoln, Colonization, and the Rights of Black Americans, Eric Foner et al. (eds.) *Slavery’s Ghost: The Problem of Freedom in the Age of Emancipation*. Baltimore, 2011, 38. [Hereinafter Foner, Lincoln]

15 Abraham Lincoln, Eulogy on Henry Clay, July 6, 1852. *Lincoln: Speeches*, I, 271.

16 For a comparative analysis of the issue of colonization in the politics of Jefferson and Lincoln see, István Kornél Vida, ‘Sustained by Mr. Jefferson’: Colonizationism as Jeffersonian Heritage in Abraham Lincoln’s Thinking, = *Eger Journal of American Studies*. Special Issue in Honor of Professor Zoltán Abádi-Nagy. XII/2, 2010, 593-601.

in 1854: "If all earthly power were given me, I should not know what to do, as to the existing institution. My first impulse would be to free all the slaves, and send them to Liberia, – to their own native land. But a moment's reflection would convince me, that whatever of high hope, (as I think there is) there may be in this, in the long run, its sudden execution is impossible."¹⁷

Despite the obvious impracticalities of colonization, it did remain on Lincoln's agenda during the first years of his presidency. His agents sought for possible locations for the colonies of emancipated slaves in Honduras, Guatemala, Costa Rica and in the Yucatán. A Washington newspaper even suggested that the proposed black colony should be named after him and called 'Lincolnia'. In August 1862 Lincoln invited a group of black delegates to the White House, for the first time in American history, but this special moment was definitely shadowed by what he told them, as he made an attempt to convince them of the necessity of colonization:

You and we are different races. We have between us a broader difference than exists between almost any other two races. Whether it is right or wrong I need not discuss, but this physical difference is a great disadvantage to us both, as I think your race suffers very greatly, many of them by living among us, while ours suffer from your presence. In a word we suffer on each side. If this is admitted, it affords a reason at least why we should be separated.¹⁸

Lincoln also included colonization in his Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation on September 23, 1862 which was to follow "immediate, or gradual abolishment of slavery" and was to take place "with their [the emancipated slaves'] consent, upon this continent, or elsewhere, with the previously obtained consent of the Governments existing there."¹⁹

The period between September 1862 and January 1, 1863, when Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation was issued, marks a major turning point in Lincoln's approach to post-slavery American society: he called for immediate emancipation without compensation and did not even mention colonization – just like he never made any public mentioning of colonization afterwards. Frederick Douglass was proven right as he had

17 Abraham Lincoln's Speech at Peoria, IL, October 16, 1854, *Lincoln: Speeches*, I, 316.

18 "Address on Colonization to a Committee of Colored Men", *Lincoln: Speeches*, II, 353.

19 "Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation". *Lincoln: Speeches*, II, 368.

predicted that “the progress of war would educate Mr. Lincoln out of his idea of the deportation of the Negro.”²⁰

A major shift in the political career of Abraham Lincoln was brought about the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854: he became member and soon a leading figure of the new Republican Party, which was formed in the wave of resistance to the legislation making the territorial expansion of the institution of slavery possible. His transformation from a whig to a republican necessarily meant that he more frequently invoked the political wisdom of Thomas Jefferson, as the members of the new party equated Republicanism with true Jeffersonianism. As Foner pointed out, Jefferson supplanted Clay as Lincoln’s “touchstone of political wisdom”, and Lincoln’s speeches indeed reveal his growing familiarity with Jefferson’s writings and that he identified with his political views to a great extent.²¹

In 1854 Lincoln was running for the state legislature in Illinois and during the campaign he took part in a series of political debates with Stephen Douglas, followed with keen interest by many in the state as well as nationwide. In perhaps his most famous speech, delivered in Peoria, IL on October 16, 1854, Lincoln called Jefferson “the most distinguished politician of our history”, who, despite being a slave-owner himself “conceived the idea to prevent slavery ever going into the northwestern territory.”²² According to Lincoln, the policy of prohibiting slavery in new territories, set in stone for several decades by the Missouri Compromise of 1820, had its roots in Thomas Jefferson’s thinking. Referring to the Missouri Compromise, he pointed out that the days of compromise were over, and the underlying issue was the relevance or irrelevance of the Declaration of Independence. Lincoln expressed his concerns about the course the United States was taking, which seemed to deviate from what the founding fathers envisioned as the right one to follow:

Our progress in degeneracy appears to me to be very rapid. As a nation, we begin by declaring ‘all men are created equal.’ We now practically read it ‘all men are created equal except negroes.’ When the Know-Nothings get control, it will read ‘all men are created equal, except

20 Quoted in: <http://www.mrlincolnanfreedom.org/inside.asp?ID=69&subjectID=4> (Accessed on December 7, 2013)

21 Foner, Lincoln, 38.

22 *Lincoln: Speeches*, I, 309. The Northwest Ordinance was based on Jefferson’s proposal to create a federal domain through state cessions of western lands as well as dividing the territory into gridded townships so that they could be sold and thus provide revenue for the federal government.

Negroes, and foreigners, and Catholics.’ When it comes to this I should prefer emigrating to some country where they make no pretense of loving liberty – Russia, for instance, where despotism can be taken pure, and without the base alloy of hypocrisy.²³

In 1857 in the *Dred Scott v. Sandford* case the Supreme Court reached the controversial decision that people of African descent held as slaves (or their descendants) did not enjoy the protection of the Constitution and could never become U.S. citizens. In his evaluation of the Court’s decision, Lincoln again took the Declaration of Independence as a standard to live up to and claimed that Chief Justice Roger B. Taney had been of the opinion that Negroes were not men in the eyes of the Declaration and the Constitution, hence had no claim to the inalienable rights of man. At this point, however, Lincoln himself believed in the “abstract” equality of African-Americans which could be achieved only on the long run and claimed that “they [the founding fathers][had] meant simply to declare the right, so that enforcement of it might follow as fast as circumstances would permit. He argued that “they [had] met to set up a standard maxim for free society, which should be familiar to all, and revered by all.”²⁴

During a series of debates with Stephen Douglas for the senatorial seat of the state of Illinois in 1858, Lincoln was constantly accused of advocating abolitionist ideas. In return, he claimed that Douglas had been “the first person ever to assert that the Negro was excluded from the rights proclaimed in 1776.” He identified it as his primary goal to “combat [the] tendency to dehumanize the negro – to take away from him the right of ever striving to be a man.”²⁵

Lincoln readily acknowledged that the principles of the Declaration of Independence meant no legal obligation under the Constitution, at the same time, read the two documents as being fully compatible with each other. In his speech delivered at Chicago on July 10, 1858, Lincoln took an unusually radical stand: “If that declaration is not the truth, let us get the Statute book, in which we find it and tear it out!”²⁶ He noted, however, that the word ‘slavery’ did not even appear in the text of the Constitution

23 Abraham Lincoln, Letter to Joshua Speed, August 24, 1855, *Lincoln: Speeches*, I, 363.

24 Abraham Lincoln, Speech on Dred Scott Decision, June 26, 1857, *Lincoln: Speeches*, I, 398.

25 *Lincoln: Speeches*, I, 798.

26 Abraham Lincoln’s speech at Chicago, IL, July 10, 1858, *Lincoln: Speeches*, I, 456.

what he took as a proof that the Founding Fathers had hoped it would soon disappear from the face of the Earth.

On April 6, 1859 Lincoln was invited to a Republican festival in Boston under the banner of Thomas Jefferson, the author of the Declaration of Independence as well as the father of slavery restriction, as was emphasized at the event. In his letter responding to the organizers, Lincoln, who was unable to attend, wrote about Jefferson:

The principles of Jefferson are the definitions and axioms of free society. And yet they are denied, and evaded, with no small show of success. One dashinglly calls them “glittering generalities”; another bluntly calls them “self evident lies”; and still others insidiously argue that they apply only to “superior races... 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.²⁷

During the presidential campaign of 1860, Lincoln and the Republican Party pledged fidelity to the Declaration of Independence. Later, already as president-elect, in his speech delivered in front of a distinguished audience at the Independence Hall in Philadelphia on February 22, 1861, he confessed: “I have never had a feeling politically that did not spring from the sentiments embodied in the Declaration of Independence.”²⁸ Interestingly, during the secession crisis, both the Union and the Confederate governments appealed to the principles of the revolutionary fathers. Jefferson Davis, the president of the Confederate States of America, took the same stand as the colonists during the revolution, which was, as he put it, “the American idea that governments rest on the consent of the governed, and that it is the right of the people to alter or abolish them at will whenever they become destructive to the ends for which they were established.”²⁹ The major difference between the Northern and Southern interpretation of the legacy of the Declaration

²⁷ Lincoln’s letter written on April 6, 1859. Quoted in Hay-Nicolay, *Abraham Lincoln*, II, 182.

²⁸ Abraham Lincoln’s Speech at Independence Hall, Philadelphia, PA, February 22, 1861, *Lincoln: Speeches*, II, 213.

²⁹ Inaugural Address of the President of the Provisional Government, February 18, 1861, In. James R. Arnold and Roberta Wiener (eds.) *American Civil War: the Essential Reference Guide*. Santa Barbara, CA, 2011, 256.

of Independence concerned, of course, the status and future of African Americans: according to Southern spokesmen the subordination of the Negro to the superior white race was natural and normal. In contrast, Lincoln argued that the Union stood for something different: it fought for the American experiment which proved to validity of the principle of "Liberty to all." He warned the South that they wage "largely, if not exclusively, a war upon the first principles of popular government—the rights of the people."³⁰

The most controversial element in Thomas Jefferson's career is the apparent contradiction between his ideas and the fact that he himself was a slave-holder. Historian Joseph R. Fornieri is right when he asks in his book entitled *Abraham Lincoln's Political Faith* whether or not this "excludes him from consideration as an important source of American republicanism."³¹ Unlike his Southern contemporaries, Lincoln did not turn a blind eye to this fact and did not attempt to make excuses for it. He argued that Jefferson had been deeply ashamed of slavery and had considered it socially and politically incompatible with American republicanism, natural law and right. To support his statement, Lincoln frequently quoted Jefferson's writings in which he had condemned the institution of slavery: Lincoln saw them as proofs that Jefferson himself had wanted to place the "peculiar institution" on a path of ultimate extinction. Among these probably the most memorable was Jefferson's warning of a divine judgement for the national sin of slavery in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*: "Indeed, I tremble for my country when I reflect that – God is just; that his justice cannot sleep forever[...] that it may become probable by supernatural interference. The Almighty has no attribute which can take side with us in such a contest."³²

Both Jefferson and Lincoln had reservations about the enlistment of African Americans in the military which soon, however, became a pressing military necessity in the War of Independence as well as in the Civil War. In 1779, Jefferson, then governor of Virginia, took a stand against the enlistment of African Americans. He acknowledged that they sometimes displayed courage, but, according to him, this was due to their inability to appreciate the dangers into which their actions took them. They were aware of the degree of their degradation, so when considering whether they could be used to fight for the freedom of their masters, he

30 "Annual Message to Congress," December 3, 1861 in *Lincoln: Speeches*, II, 295.

31 Joseph R. Fornieri, *Abraham Lincoln's Political Faith*. DeKalb, IL, 2003, 31.

32 Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*. Philadelphia, 1801, 321.

worried too much about the possibility of a slave insurrection to give them guns. Similarly, Lincoln had second thoughts about the blacks' military service, but later, out of military necessity, consented to the formation of colored regiments, what is more, their contribution to the military effort of the Union became the most important argument for emancipation.

Abraham Lincoln's speech delivered on November 19, 1863, at the dedication of the Soldiers' National Cemetery in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania is one of the most famous orations in American history, and it is a most exciting source to trace Jefferson's influence on Lincoln. Historian Stephen E. Lucas called its second sentence, an enumeration of the desired human rights, "one of the best-known sentences in the English language"³³: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." In his Gettysburg Address Lincoln realized that Jefferson's ideas were no longer considered to be points of reference: "It is no child's play to save the principles of Jefferson from total overthrow in this nation...with no small show of success,"³⁴ he pointed out. He, therefore, "downgraded" the Jeffersonian principles to being a "proposition" instead of being self-evident, which would require no further proof. These all-essential principles included equality, natural rights, and the sovereignty of people.

Both Jefferson and Lincoln are clearly infixed in the American national memory. However, the reputation of both of them has undergone significant changes. Writing about Jefferson, historian Peterson points out: "The image of Jefferson in American culture has always been a sensitive reflector [...] of America's troubled search for the image of itself."³⁵ Gordon S. Wood took this idea further and concluded: "if something is wrong with America, something has to be wrong with Jefferson."³⁶ His observation seems to be valid, as in 2009's C-Span Presidents' Popularity Survey Thomas

33 Stephen E. Lucas, *Justifying America: The Declaration of Independence as a Rhetorical Document*, In. Thomas W. Benson (ed.), *American Rhetoric*. Carbondale, IL, 1989, 85.

34 Another Letter from Mr. Lincoln: His Views of the Political Doctrines Advocated by Jefferson", *The New York Times*, July 9, 1860.

35 Merrill D. Peterson, *The Jefferson Image in the American Mind*. Charlottesville, VA, 1998, 9.

36 Gordon S. Wood, *The Trials and Tribulations of Thomas Jefferson*, In. Peter S. Onuf (ed.), *Jeffersonian Legacies*. Charlottesville, VA, 1993, 395.

Jefferson ranked only 7th: his worst position in the past 50 years.³⁷ His views of black Americans and slavery made him most vulnerable to modern criticism: there is a huge contrast between Jefferson's great declarations of liberty and equality and the fact that he himself owned slaves. Many are ready to believe that he indeed hated the institution of slavery, but he never followed the example of George Washington, and manumitted only few of his slaves. William W. Freehling wrote about associating his figure with the abolitionist movement: "Jefferson's attitudes and actions towards blacks are so repugnant these days that identifying him with the antislavery movement actually discredits the reform movement."³⁸ A fatal blow to the public image of Jefferson was the Jefferson-Hemings controversy: the analysis of DNA results showed conclusive evidence that there was a match between the male line of the Jefferson family and a descendant of the Hemings family, suggesting an intimate relationship between Jefferson and his mixed-race slave, Sally Hemings, what is more, in all likelihood the father of the Declaration of Independence also fathered the six children of Sally. The Sally Hemings case caused many to come to the realization that Thomas Jefferson had not been perfect. Illustrative of this is Lois E. Horton's "Avoiding History: Thomas Jefferson, Sally Hemings, and the Uncomfortable Public Conversation on Slavery" in which the author made interviews with visitors at Monticello, Jefferson's shrine. She quotes one visitor: "Thinking of Jefferson as a slaveholder brought him down off the pedestal upon which the history they learned had placed him."³⁹ Another possible level of interpretation of this, equally or even more important in the eyes of the public, is that of a sex scandal: the appearance of the element of sexuality in general in the Jefferson myth seemed incompatible with how many viewed one of the builders of the nation, not to mention the fact that he abused his powers allotted to him by a racist society. Southern white males had denied the case for long decades due to deeming having sex with a black slave decadent and morally impure. Above all they denied that there could be a love relationship between Jefferson and Sally, as this would have given the African-American woman power over a white male.

37 For the full presidential ranking see, <http://legacy.c-span.org/PresidentialSurvey/Overall-Ranking.aspx> (Accessed on January 16, 2013.)

38 William F. Freehling, *The Road to Disunion: Volume I: Secessionists at Bay, 1776-1854*. Oxford, 1991, 123.

39 Lois E. Horton, "Avoiding History: Thomas Jefferson, Sally Hemings, and the Uncomfortable Public Conversation on Slavery," in James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton (eds.) *Slavery and Public History: The Tough Stuff of American Memory*. Chapel Hill, NC, 2008, 144.

At C-Span's already-mentioned Presidents' Popularity Survey Abraham Lincoln finished first⁴⁰, and since then the bicentennial celebrations of his birthday and the invocation of his political legacy during the election campaign by President Barack Obama have further elevated the public interest in him. His myth, similarly to that of Jefferson, needed this, as in the late 1960s, with the coming of the Civil Rights Movements, the demand went hand in hand to take a measure of him with special attention paid to his record concerning racial equality and justice. As a result, Lincoln's "Great Emancipator" image became questioned, and in the anti-Lincoln tradition the white supremacist imagery emerged, which never managed to dominate the scholarly literature, but enforced the revision of earlier taken-for-granted assumptions by opening new debates. Interestingly enough, Lincolnia has not escaped having its sex scandal either. In 2003, C.A. Tripp stirred up the waters of Lincoln scholarship, with his *The Intimate World of Abraham Lincoln*, claiming that Abraham Lincoln was homosexual, who had sexual relationship with his friend, Joshua F. Speed, and Captain Derickson, an officer of his bodyguard.⁴¹ Most historians agree that the evidence presented by Tripp is inconclusive, some even suspect that Tripp's was an attempt to pull the rug out from under George W. Bush's proposed constitutional amendment banning same-sex marriage. This "outing" of Lincoln guaranteed that for a while every Lincoln scholar could count on getting a question about it at forums. This was harmful on two levels: 1) It is a perfect example of forcing contemporary expectations and value systems on the past 2) As well as of intrusion of contemporary politics into the realm of history, with more often than not historical accuracy falling victim.

In the immediate aftermath of the Lincoln bicentennial, it is not exactly fair to compare the standing of Jefferson and Lincoln in public memory. Many considered the election of Barack Obama as the fulfillment of what Abraham Lincoln had struggled for and the historical parallels drawn between them created an elevated interest in the legacy of the 16th president (and saved Lincoln from the sensationalism surrounding the 'Gay Lincoln' theory.) This has its own danger, however, as Lincoln clichés seem to replace meaningful analyses. As Eric Foner said in an interview: "Lincoln is a Rorschach test. Everybody finds themselves in Lincoln. Everybody finds what they want to find in Lincoln. There are

40 <http://legacy.c-span.org/PresidentialSurvey/Overall-Ranking.aspx> (Accessed on January 16, 2013)

41 C.A. Tripp, *The Intimate World of Abraham Lincoln*. New York, 2005.

dozens of Lincolns out there. So saying I'm reading Lincoln or modeling myself on Lincoln' doesn't really tell us a heck of a lot."⁴²

Thomas Jefferson is usually not mentioned among the politicians that influenced the political thinking of Abraham Lincoln, yet the close analysis of his speeches and writings reveal that from the 1850s on Lincoln, as one of the leaders of the newly-founded Republican Party, was familiar with Jefferson's work and frequently used it as a point of reference and source of inspiration on at least three levels: as a man, as a politician, Whig and Republican, and as an emancipator. They shared similar core values and their approach to the future of the institution of slavery also shows remarkable parallels. The historical period they lived in offered different opportunities for taking actual measures regarding it which gives Lincoln more appeal in the eyes of posterity. Nevertheless, both Lincoln and Jefferson are present and influence us on so many levels, which makes their understanding probably even more challenging, undoubtedly prompting lots of scholarly discussions in the future, too.

42 CNN interview with Eric Foner, January 17, 2009. See, http://articles.cnn.com/2009-01-17/politics/lincoln.obsession_1_lincoln-bible-16th-president-president-bush?_s=PM:POLITICS (Accessed on January 12, 2013)