

A HUMANITARIAN AS BROAD AS THE WORLD: ABRAHAM LINCOLN'S LEGACY IN INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT

Conference at the GHI, October 4–6, 2007. Endorsed by the Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial Commission. Conveners: Gabor Boritt (Gettysburg College), Uwe Lübken (GHI), Jörg Nagler (University of Jena). Participants: Yvette M. Alex-Assensoh (Indiana University), Akwasi B. Assensoh (Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi), Bettina Hofmann (University of Wuppertal), Prafulla Kar (Centre for Contemporary Theory, Baroda), Michael C. Kimmage (Catholic University), Tanis Lovercheck-Saunders (Valley City State University), Thomas D. Matijasic (Big Sandy Community and Technical College), Patricia Moral (Buenos Aires), William Pederson (Louisiana State University), Jacques Portes (University of Paris VIII Saint Denis), Leslie Rowland (University of Maryland), Matthew Specter (George Mason University), Amrit Tandon (Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Fund, New Delhi), Hans L. Trefousse (Brooklyn College), Hasan Al Zayed (East West University, Dhaka).

Abraham Lincoln is a world-renowned figure whose political legacy continues to exert a powerful influence to this day. Protesters against injustice have echoed his famous definition of democracy—"government of the people, by the people, for the people"—around the world: in Hungary in 1956, Tehran in 1979, and Tiananmen Square in 1989. Despite his tremendous stature, little research has been done on international perceptions of Lincoln. This conference therefore focused on the global reception of Lincoln as a politician, thinker, and moral exemplar.

In his opening remarks, Jörg Nagler emphasized that the discussion would concentrate not on Lincoln as a historical figure, but rather on individual and collective perceptions of him. Because such perceptions are deeply rooted in the history and culture of the respective community, they can tell us a lot about those who generated them. The specific interrelations between image, object, and interest of the perceiving subject, be it an individual or a group, thus become of primary interest. At the same time, the image of Abraham Lincoln is inseparable from the political and historical culture that produced it, as Nagler pointed out. In other words, when analyzing international perceptions of Lincoln, we are simultaneously analyzing and interpreting US history and culture. Nagler then suggested some topics that participants might address: How, why,

and in what historical contexts have Lincoln's notions of political equality inspired reformist and revolutionary leaders in disparate societies worldwide? What significance should we attach to the fact that his international reputation began to grow sharply after 1945—that is, just as former European colonies were asserting their independence? Did Lincoln's legacy influence or even hasten the decolonization process? How have the image and iconography of Lincoln been used to advance human rights in Africa, South and Central America, and elsewhere? Has this self-made man and martyred president been perceived as a representative of a single nation or system of government or as a champion of universal human rights?

Yvette Alex-Assensoh outlined the ambiguous character of Lincoln's attitude toward African Americans. Although the "Great Emancipator" argued that all men were created equal, Lincoln also held that there could never be equality between black and white people. Before he issued the Emancipation Proclamation, Lincoln had enforced the fugitive slave laws and even advocated colonization and deportation schemes. His image, as Alex-Assensoh showed, has changed significantly over the decades and is still under debate. One important and largely overlooked influence on Lincoln's view of African Americans was his legal experience, in particular his reverence for the law, his firm belief that the most important court to which he appealed as president was the court of opinion, and his conviction that compromise was preferable to litigation. She concluded that despite these contradictions, Lincoln's example has served as a beacon for countries around the world in coping with ethnic and racial conflicts or internal strife.

Hans Trefousse discussed Lincoln's stance toward German-American immigrants and his keen interest in mobilizing this ethnic group for the Republican Party. Lincoln enjoyed a close relationship with the German-American ethnic leadership, including some of the exiled leaders of the failed revolution of 1848/49, the so-called Forty-Eighters. During the presidential campaign of 1860, Lincoln secretly purchased a German-American newspaper in Illinois in the hope of influencing German-American public opinion in his home state. During the Civil War, the more radical German-Americans became critical of Lincoln's military policies, disappointed by his failure to emancipate the slaves as soon as Fort Sumter fell to the Confederate troops. Trefousse then explored how Lincoln supported the recruiting of German-American troops, and how, by commissioning German-Americans as high-ranking officers in the Union Army, he was able to attract the "German vote" to the Republican Party. Trefousse concluded by briefly describing the reaction in Germany to Lincoln's assassination, an event that evoked strong expressions of grief for the slain president, who was perceived as a symbol of freedom.

Bettina Hofmann traced Lincoln's status as an icon of the German labor movement back to Karl Marx. In a letter written in 1864 to congratulate Lincoln on his reelection on behalf of the International Working Men's Association, Marx called this American president "the single-minded Son of the Working Class" and expressed his belief that the outcome of the war would initiate a new social order. For Marx, the Civil War was basically a clash between two incompatible economic systems, driven by either wage labor or slave labor. Thus, he interpreted American slavery mostly in European terms of class struggle. The publication of Marx's letter by Wilhelm Liebknecht in the *Sozialdemokrat* laid the foundation for widespread admiration of Lincoln, not only among the intellectuals of the party elite, but also among the rank and file of the German labor movement. While acknowledging that the image of Lincoln may have served other functions in different corners of the world, Hofmann concluded that within the German socialist community, he was revered as a leader who advanced the cause of the workingman and thus improved the lot of mankind.

By contrast, as Jacques Portes explained, in France, Lincoln was and still is an obscure figure, overshadowed by both grand events and more popular American presidents like George Washington, Woodrow Wilson, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and, most of all, John F. Kennedy. Focusing on representations of Lincoln in French magazines and daily papers, Portes demonstrated how, in French public opinion, the American president appeared indecisive at the beginning of the Civil War. Only with the Emancipation Proclamation could French Republicans applaud him, but they were still unable to grasp the profound significance of the event. French conservatives, on the other hand, were appalled by Lincoln's radical act. Portes concluded that a public more accustomed to tyrants than to democratic statesmen was unable to recognize the depth of Lincoln's character or the breadth of his political vision.

In a paper titled "Lincoln Transfigured: Gandhi and the Politics of Compassion," Prafulla Kar showed how Lincoln's experiment with ethical politics at a critical juncture of American history became a benchmark for evaluating the success and failure of similar attempts by reformers in other countries. He also addressed the methodological question of how to map a legacy. This is especially important when dealing with Lincoln's influence on Gandhi, since the latter barely mentions Lincoln in his writings. Drawing on F. R. Leavis's concept of "The Great Tradition," Walter Benjamin's work on translation, and Harold Bloom's notion of an "anxiety of influence," Kar asserted a conceptual relationship between Gandhi and Lincoln that transcended the historicity of their struggles and the local conditions that determined their actions. Kar pointed out that both

Lincoln and Gandhi believed in the cultivation of restraint, both cherished the value of rational debate, and both were pragmatists in politics, although a strong sense of religiosity and faith in a “higher law” are apparent in Lincoln’s as well as Gandhi’s biography. In the end, each died in pursuit of his ideals.

Unlike Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru—the architect of modern India and one of the most prominent representatives of the new spirit of Asia in the postwar world—made frequent references to Lincoln in his writings and speeches. As Amrit Tandon noted in his contribution, Nehru even owned a bronze cast of Lincoln’s right hand that had been presented to him by Arthur E. Morgan in 1949. Lincoln was a natural role model and influence for Nehru, since both statesmen were confronted with secessionist movements that threatened the very survival of their respective union.

Hasan Al Zayed described Lincoln’s image as a champion of human rights and democratic values not only in India, but throughout Asia. Asian leaders often quoted him to improve their own credibility, whereas people across the continent invoked Lincoln’s speeches on democracy and justice to protest the lack of freedom in their own countries. Asian perceptions of Lincoln are, however, complexly intertwined with attitudes toward the West, international politics, the flow of capital, and the processes of knowledge production, as Al Zayed explained. Thus it was possible for the Tamils in Southern India to regard Lincoln as “one of the Mahatmas of the world” and for Gandhi and Nehru to pursue Lincolnian ideals even as Lincoln’s achievements also found admirers among autocrats and dictators. Politicians of communist China, for example, repeatedly invoked Lincoln’s legacy to ward off accusations of human-rights violations in Tibet and to justify Peking’s policy toward Taiwan. In the same vein, admiration for Lincoln shown by Indonesian president Sukarno and Pakistan’s Pervez Musharraf is restricted to personal veneration while they ignore the implications of Lincoln’s political philosophy. Those Asian leaders who claim Lincoln as their inspiration, Al Zayed concluded, have often quoted his speeches in order to shore up their own political agendas while pursuing policies that contradict his ideals. Lincoln’s influence on leadership was also the topic of Akwasi B. Assensoh’s paper. Focusing on Ghanaian president Kwame Nkrumah, one of Africa’s best-known leaders and a leading proponent of both Pan-Africanism and the Non-Aligned movement of the 1960s, Assensoh examined Lincolnian elements of forgiveness, reconciliation, and healing in African politics in the twentieth century.

In his paper “Lincoln, Democracy, and the Founders of Czechoslovakia,” Thomas Matijasic explained how during World War I, Czech leader Thomas Masaryk drew inspiration from Lincoln and how he used

his knowledge of Lincoln's legacy to tie the cause of Czech independence to the larger American vision of making the world safe for democracy. Tanis Lovercheck-Saunders presented a comparative analysis of the "Great Emancipator" Abraham Lincoln and the "Tsar Liberator" Alexander II. Both leaders sought to ease the suffering of millions, and both were in the end assassinated for their efforts. Alexander II, although he freed twenty million serfs, has rarely received the credit he deserves for this accomplishment. The tsar himself claimed that, in giving them land as well as personal liberty, he had done more for the Russian serfs than Lincoln had done for the slaves, since the American president had not provided them with the material means of subsistence. Russians, however, were particularly impressed by Lincoln's humility—in both positive and negative senses. While Imperial Russian diplomats regarded it as a weakness, Soviet-era historians like A. V. Efimov or Robert Fedorovich Ivanov saw it as an asset. The latter, in his 1976 book *American History and the Black Question*, offers a remarkably balanced and critical account of the Civil War and especially of Lincoln's failures and achievements. Tolstoy, too, was impressed by Lincoln, whom he referred to as "Christ in miniature." The Russian writer held that Lincoln, though neither a great general nor a skillful statesman, derived tremendous power from his moral authority and his unique character. To him, Lincoln was "a humanitarian as broad as the world."

Two papers dealt with Abraham Lincoln's influence in Latin America. Patricia Moral traced Lincoln's influence on education in Argentina by analyzing three different schools named for him, and William D. Pederson claimed that no region of the world outside the United States has been more influenced by Lincoln's political legacy than Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean. This is especially surprising when one recalls that Mexico lost half its territory to the United States during the Mexican American War (1846–1848). Lincoln, however, is remembered by many Mexicans as an opponent of that conflict. Pederson called attention in particular to how Lincoln has been memorialized in, for example, a thirteen-foot statue by sculptor Angel Tarrac in the Mexican border town of Juarez; stamps issued by the Federal Government of Honduras; and public spaces named for Lincoln, such as a sugar refinery in Cuba or avenues in El Salvador and the Dominican Republic.

Perhaps Lincoln's legacy throughout the world can best be described as heterogeneous. Paradoxically, he became a model for those who wanted to preserve the unity of a state as well as for those who sought to throw off the yoke of empire. His humble origins made him appealing to the working class, but also raised doubts about his ability to lead a nation in crisis. Portraits, busts, and photographs of Lincoln have decorated the

offices of numerous politicians, many of them democrats and liberators, such as Willy Brandt, José Martí, or Thomas Masaryk. Others, like Fulgencio Batista or Fidel Castro, were of a more dictatorial nature. In most cases, however, the invocation of Lincoln's legacy has provided inspiration for freedom movements, reformers, and all those who seek to preserve human rights.

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