



Written by [Daniel Sayani](#) on March 10, 2011

## Researchers Further Reveal Abraham Lincoln's Racism

Other scholars, such as Harvard expert Henry Louis Gates, Jr., have explored the complexities of Abraham Lincoln's views on race, raising awareness regarding the [fallacy](#) of those who view Lincoln as a great anti-racist.

Lincoln's views on race and the equality of African Americans are the focus of a recent book on the subject, [Colonization After Emancipation: Lincoln and the Movement for Black Resettlement](#). Authored by George Mason University researchers Phillip W. Magness and Sebastian N. Page, the book examines numerous historical documents from the Library of Congress and British National Archives, and demonstrates that Lincoln possessed a strong commitment to the resettlement of African Americans on the African continent. Lincoln's racial legacy is controversial, notes Magness, because of its complexity, a historical truth that forces the historical establishment and the American education system to reevaluate its presentation of Lincoln, who may not be the great anti-racist egalitarian historians previously made him out to be.



As reported by [The Blaze](#), Lincoln's views about colonization are well known among historians, even if they don't make it into most schoolbooks. Lincoln even referred to colonization in the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, his September 1862 warning to the South that he would free all slaves in Southern territory if the rebellion continued. Unlike some others, Lincoln always promoted a voluntary colonization, rather than forcing blacks to leave. But historians differ on whether Lincoln moved away from colonization after he issued the official Emancipation Proclamation on Jan. 1, 1863, or whether he continued to support it.

Magness and Page's book offers evidence that Lincoln continued to support colonization, engaging in secret diplomacy with the British to establish a colony in British Honduras, now Belize. Among the records found at the British archives is an 1863 order from Lincoln granting a British agent permission to recruit volunteers for a Belize colony.

"He didn't let colonization die off. He became very active in promoting it in the private sphere, through diplomatic channels," Magness said. He surmises that Lincoln grew weary of the controversy that surrounded colonization efforts, which had become enmeshed in scandal and were criticized by many abolitionists.



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As late as 1864, Magness found a notation that Lincoln asked the attorney general whether he could continue to receive counsel from James Mitchell, his colonization commissioner, even after Congress had eliminated funding for Mitchell's office.

While Magness and Page's book offers a unique insight into previously unknown and unreported historical documents adding to our understanding of Lincoln and his views on race, an entire corpus of literature already exists which demonstrates that Lincoln's considerations in fighting the Civil War were not motivated by a deep humanitarian sense of liberating African Americans from the cruel and bitter scourge of slavery, but instead by his desire to see the integrity of the Union preserved, as he opposed Southern secession, but nonetheless, did not share any profound commitment to abolitionism or to the equality and full inclusion and integration of blacks into American society.

Lincoln's commitment to the resettlement of African Americans is particularly revealing because it demonstrates his belief that African Americans were incapable of being assimilated into white society, and that they were socially unequal to whites, thus "requiring" their forced resettlement to Africa or even Central America, in his view.

Magness and Page not only explore Lincoln's connections with the African Colonization Society and other African resettlement societies, but also examine [sources](#) highlighting Lincoln's elaborate and profoundly immoral plan to relocate freed slaves to a Central American colony where they would function as indentured servants for syndicates providing various commodities to the U.S. armed forces in a mercantilist relationship:

Ambrose W. Thompson, a Philadelphian who had grown rich in coastal shipping, provided the new president with what seemed to be a good opportunity. Thompson had obtained control of several hundred thousand acres in the Chiriqui region of what is now Panama, and had formed the "Chiriqui Improvement Company." He proposed transporting liberated blacks from the United States to the Central American region, where they would mine the coal that was supposedly there in abundance. This coal would be sold to the US Navy, with the resulting profits used to sustain the black colony, including development of plantations of cotton, sugar, coffee, and rice. The Chiriqui project would also help to extend US commercial dominance over tropical America.

Negotiations to realize the plan began in May 1861, and on August 8, Thompson made a formal proposal to Secretary of the Navy Gideon Wells to deliver coal from Chiriqui at one-half the price the government was then paying. Meanwhile, Lincoln had referred the proposal to his brother-in-law, Ninian W. Edwards, who, on August 9, 1861, enthusiastically endorsed the proposed contract.

Eager to proceed with the Chiriqui project, on August 14, 1862, Lincoln met with five free black ministers, the first time a delegation of their race was invited to the White House on a matter of public policy. The President made no effort to engage in conversation with the visitors, who were bluntly informed that they had been invited to listen. Lincoln did not mince words, but candidly told the group, "Even when you cease to be slaves, you are yet far removed from being placed on an equality with the white race.... The aspiration of men is to enjoy equality with the best when free, but on this broad continent, not a single man of your race is made the equal of a single man of ours. Go where you are treated the best, and the ban is still upon you."

Likewise, an analysis of Lincoln's life and career as an Illinois politician and attorney demonstrates that Lincoln the politician did not recognize blacks as his social or political equals and, during his years as a



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lawyer and office seeker living in Illinois, his opinion on this did not change. Lincoln was opposed to the institution of slavery during his entire lifetime but, like most white Americans, he was not an abolitionist ([according to](#) Professor Stacy Pratt McDermott of the University of Illinois-Springfield).

During the 1840s, when Lincoln was establishing himself in Springfield's legal, political, and social circles, he was a frequent guest in the homes of individuals who held slaves, despite the fact that slavery by that time had been declared unconstitutional under Article VI of the Illinois State Constitution. In at least one case as a young attorney, Lincoln represented a slave-owner, Robert Matson. Lincoln's client each year brought a crew of slaves from his plantation in Kentucky to a farm he owned in Illinois for seasonal work. In 1847, Matson brought to the farm his favorite mulatto slave, Jane Bryant (wife of his free, black overseer there), and her four children.

A dispute developed between Jane Bryant and Matson's white housekeeper, who threatened to have Jane and her children returned to slavery in the South. With the help of local abolitionists, the Bryants fled. They were apprehended, and in an affidavit sworn out before a justice of the peace, Matson claimed them as his property. Lacking the required certificates of freedom, Bryant and the children were confined to local county jail as the case was argued in court. Lincoln lost the case, and Bryant and her children were declared free.

It therefore comes as no surprise that Lincoln was a vociferous defender of racial segregation throughout his career — he simply believed that racial integration was impossible, as evident in [his comments](#) at the first of the famous Lincoln-Douglas Debates, in August 1858:

I have no purpose to introduce political and social equality between the white and the black races. There is physical difference between the two, which in my judgment will probably forever forbid their living together upon the footing of perfect equality, and inasmuch as it becomes a necessity that there must be a difference, I, as well as Judge Douglas, am in favor of the race to which I belong having the superior position.

I will say then that I am not, nor ever have been, in favor of bringing about in any way the social and political equality of the white and black races; I am not nor ever have been in favor of making voters or jurors of negroes, nor of qualifying them to hold office, nor to intermarry with white people.

I will say in addition to this that there is a physical difference between the white and black races which I believe will forever forbid the two races living together on terms of social and political equality. And inasmuch as they cannot so live, while they do remain together there must be the position of superior and inferior, and I, as much as any other man, am in favor of having the superior position assigned to the white race.

The phenomenon of Americans ignoring Lincoln's segregationist views is best described by the late columnist [Joseph Sobran](#), who bifurcates the "fantasy Lincoln" and the true, racist Lincoln:

When Lincoln finally did grab the slavery issue in 1854, he again followed (Henry) Clay in advocating gradual emancipation, combined with a program of colonization — resettling former slaves outside of the United States. He expressly opposed political and social equality for Negroes in this country. They should be equal all right, but not here.... Lincoln's segregationist views are soft-peddled, shrugged off, explained away, or simply ignored ... the Fantasy Lincoln must be maintained at all costs." And this is exactly what many establishment scholars today do. They maintain the cottage industry that promotes the "Fantasy Lincoln" while conveniently ignoring his



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racist views — views they seem to find abhorrent in anyone else yet perfectly alright in Mr. Lincoln.

In brief, [Colonization After Emancipation: Lincoln and the Movement for Black Resettlement](#) by Phillip W. Magness and Sebastian N. Page highlights the complexity of Abraham Lincoln's views on race and African Americans. Contrary to the widely popular view of Lincoln as a true racial egalitarian, historical documents demonstrate that his commitment to the relocation of African Americans to Africa and Central America is rooted in his racist, white-supremacist thinking that dehumanizes African Americans and seeks to write them out of the canon of American history.

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