



Written by [Thomas DiLorenzo](#) on November 25, 2025

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The Lincoln Dictatorship

AT A GLANCE

- Abraham Lincoln was a dictator by any standard.
- Lincoln suspended habeas corpus and imprisoned his political opponents.
- Lincoln censored the free press.
- Lincoln waged total war on the civilian population.



(renegade/Adobe Stock)

In his oddly named 1948 book *Constitutional Dictatorship*, Cornell University historian Clinton Rossiter devoted an entire chapter to “the Lincoln dictatorship.” In it he wrote that “Dictatorship played a decisive role in the North’s successful effort to maintain the Union by force of arms.... One man was the government of the United States.... Lincoln was a great dictator.... This great constitutional dictator was self appointed.”

By using the phrase “constitutional dictator” (and not as a joke), Rossiter was certainly not referring to the U.S. Constitution, but something more like the now-defunct Soviet constitution, which did in fact call for a dictator. This can hardly be said to have been “great” from the perspective of the *American* constitutional tradition.

Generations of Marxists and other left-wing American historians celebrated, praised, and made myriad excuses for “the Lincoln dictatorship.” In *Abraham Lincoln and the Second American Revolution*, James McPherson praised the highly centralized government that was created by this “revolution” and approvingly quoted Republican Congressman George W. Julian of Indiana as celebrating, in 1867, the “strong arm of power, outstretched from the central authority here in Washington.” In *Lincoln at Gettysburg*, leftist historian Garry Wills swooned (figuratively speaking) over how Lincoln supposedly “remade America” into some type of socialist state devoted to egalitarianism (just like the Soviet Union) by using Jefferson’s “all men are created equal” language in his Gettysburg Address. The neoconservative “Straussians” — adherents to the ideas of 20th-century political philosopher Leo Strauss, beginning with the late Professor Harry Jaffa — also embraced this Stalinist interpretation of Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address.

In *Our Secret Constitution*, Columbia University law Professor George P. Fletcher wrote of how Lincoln single-handedly “Redefined American Democracy” with the objective of “reinventing the United States” with centralized governmental power in pursuit of egalitarianism. He claims that all of this somehow created a “higher law” that trumps the actual U.S. Constitution, thereby allowing future executives to “sidestep the rules” of the Constitution, just as Lincoln had done. “Lincoln’s casual [i.e., completely dismissive] attitude toward formal constitutional institutions, such as the writ of habeas corpus,” is to be applauded, wrote Fletcher. The example of the Lincoln dictatorship has long been used as a rhetorical weapon of mass destruction of the American constitutional tradition.



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The preeminent “Lincoln scholar” of the late 20th century was University of Illinois historian James Randall. His book *Constitutional Problems Under Lincoln* is a 595-page bundle of praise for the Lincoln dictatorship combined with hundreds of excuses for Lincoln’s dictatorial behavior — which raises the question: If the Lincoln dictatorship was so great, why are all the excuses necessary? Indeed, the Lincoln excuse factory is alive and well to this day in book after book having anything to do with the subject.

Randall wrote, for example, that “great social purposes” are promoted by “abandoning constitutional barriers.” The Constitution should be viewed as “a vehicle of life,” he wrote. Translation: The Constitution should be viewed as null and void. The document is “not a straight-jacket,” he said, and we should not “endure” the writings of “a by-gone generation” (aka the Founding Fathers).

Randall even went so far as to use the “he wasn’t as bad as Hitler and Stalin” excuse to accidentally damn Lincoln with faint praise. In his 1950 edition, he wrote that Lincoln’s secret police force and the imprisonment of tens of thousands of Northern state political dissenters might have been “deplorable,” but “it was exceedingly mild by modern standards.” He also euphemistically called Lincoln’s destruction of the Founders’ system of federalism “federal-state readjustment” and concluded that, although Lincoln was a dictator, “it must be admitted that he was a benevolent dictator.”

In his *History of the United States*, James Ford Rhodes announced that “never had the power of a dictator fallen into safer and nobler hands” than during the Lincoln dictatorship.

The martyred Lincoln would be deified by the Republican Party propaganda apparatus (with the assistance of the New England clergy), which led to the eventual deification of the presidency and executive power and of the centralized state in general. In *The Deification of Lincoln*, published in 1943, Ira Cardiff wrote that by then Americans were “not at all interested in the truth about Lincoln.... They desire a supernatural Lincoln.... A biography of Lincoln which told the truth about him would probably have great difficulty finding a publisher.”

Act of Treason

The Lincoln dictatorship began with an act of treason by Abraham Lincoln himself. Treason is defined in Article III, Section 3 of the Constitution as follows: “Treason against the United States, shall consist *only* in levying War against *them*, or in adhering to *their* Enemies, giving them Aid and Comfort.” (Emphasis added.) The key words here are “them” and “their.” In all the founding documents, “United States” is in the plural, signifying that the free and independent states are united in forming a confederacy of states. Thus, treason against the United States means levying war against Virginia, South Carolina, Mississippi, etc., and *not* something called “the United States government in Washington, D.C.” That, of course, is exactly what Lincoln did. He never admitted that secession was legitimate (and that the union was therefore voluntary), and he considered the Southern states to have always been under the governance of the U.S. government. He was very clear that what he was doing was levying war upon the (formerly) United States in the South. There is no clearer example of treason in U.S. history.

Lincoln redefined treason to mean criticism of himself, his administration, or his war. He did not propose to amend the Constitution, but to redefine it all by himself, dictator style — the exact thing that President George Washington warned of in his famous Farewell Address. Having done that, he illegally



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suspended the writ of habeas corpus and ordered the military to carry out the mass arrest and imprisonment of tens of thousands of Northern state political critics without any due process.



Fort Lafayette (public domain)

The writ of habeas corpus was embodied in Great Britain's charter of freedom, the Magna Carta, and adopted in the U.S. Constitution. It requires the government to give a legal justification for holding anyone prisoner; prevents the arbitrary arrest of citizens for political reasons; and guarantees the right to a speedy public trial by an impartial jury, to be informed of the nature and cause of the accusations(s), to be confronted with witnesses against one, to bring witnesses in one's favor, and to have the assistance of trained legal counsel.

In 1861, Chief Justice of the United States Roger B. Taney issued an opinion (*Ex Parte Merryman*) that Lincoln's suspension of habeas corpus was unconstitutional. The Constitution gives the legislative branch the right to suspend habeas corpus in cases of "rebellion or invasion" — but not the executive branch. (Congress would codify the suspension two years later.) Judge Taney wrote that if habeas corpus can be "usurped by the military powers" and "the force of arms," then "the people of the United States are no longer living under a government of laws, but every citizen holds life, liberty and property at the will and pleasure of the army officer in whose military district he may happen to be found."

Lincoln's response to Judge Taney's opinion was not to issue (or have his attorney general issue) a response, but to attack the separation of powers by writing up an arrest warrant for the judge. In *Freedom Under Lincoln*, historian Dean Sprague wrote that "Taney said that he knew his own imprisonment had been under consideration by the Lincoln administration," and that "the newspapers were filled with stories of the imminent arrest of Taney." Republican Party mouthpiece Horace Greeley, editor of the *New-York Tribune*, editorialized that "It may be necessary to teach Taney a lesson about the meaning of Treason," repeating Lincoln's redefinition of treason as any criticism of the administration.

After Lincoln's death, his personal bodyguard, Ward Hill Lamon, wrote a biography of Lincoln in which he asserted that an arrest warrant had been prepared for Judge Taney. A history of the U.S. Marshals Service written by Frederick S. Calhoun, the chief historian of the service, discusses the arrest warrant. George Brown, the wartime mayor of Baltimore, published a book about Baltimore during the war in which he wrote of a conversation he had with Judge Taney about the arrest warrant. Benjamin Robbins



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Curtis, the U.S. Supreme Court justice who wrote the dissenting opinion in the *Dred Scott* case, praised Judge Taney for defending the Constitution against Lincoln in *Ex Parte Merryman* and argued that Lincoln was guilty of treason for issuing the warrant. In the end, though, the 84-year-old chief justice was not dragged from his office or his bedroom by soldiers and dumped into Fort McHenry with so many other Baltimoreans who had been imprisoned in that makeshift gulag.



Pratt Street Riot in Baltimore in 1861, between Union troops and Marylanders who felt states had the right to secede from the Union (public domain)

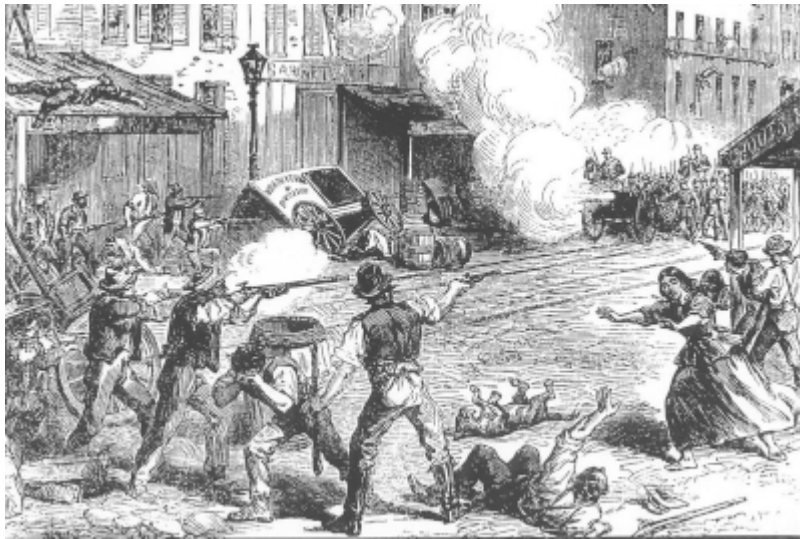
The tens of thousands of Northern citizens who *were* imprisoned in Lincoln's gulags for suspicions of "disloyalty" (to Lincoln) were not told why they were being arrested. No investigations of their alleged "crimes" were conducted, no trials were held, and there was no legal process at all. They were imprisoned for such things as "being a noisy secessionist," selling Confederate trinkets, and "hurrahing for Jeff Davis," wrote Dean Sprague in *Freedom Under Lincoln*. A minister in Alexandria, Virginia, was imprisoned for omitting a prayer for Lincoln (who, according to his wife, law partner, and bodyguard, was an atheist), and a New Orleans man was *executed* for taking down a U.S. flag.

Ten men elected to the Maryland House of Delegates in May 1861 were imprisoned after being accused of the thought crime of "harboring secessionist sympathies." In fact, all members of the Maryland State Assembly who were suspected of "secessionist sentiments" were hunted down and imprisoned so that they could not meet to discuss secession.



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New York City draft riots of 1863 (public domain)

New York City was specially targeted by Lincoln's secret military police because New Yorkers had many business relationships with Southerners and there was widespread antiwar sentiment there. New York City Mayor Fernando Wood barely escaped prison after advocating that New York City secede from both the state of New York and the United States and become a free city based on international trade.

Lincoln and other Republican Party politicians passed an indemnity act in 1863 that placed the president, his Cabinet, and the military above the law regarding their participation in the military arrests and imprisonments. Fort Lafayette in New York Harbor became known as "the American Bastille" because it warehoused so many political prisoners, many of whom were jailed for simply publicly wishing for peace. Former U.S. Senator William Gwin was imprisoned there for the "crime" of being a peace advocate. Senator Jesse Bright of Indiana was expelled from the U.S. Senate by the Republican Party for advocating peace. Such tyranny was used as a precedent and an excuse during the two world wars to imprison various "suspected" dissenters, the most notorious example of which was the herding of Japanese Americans into concentration camps for the duration of America's involvement in WWII.

Congressman Clement L. Vallandigham, a Democrat from Ohio known as "the apostle of peace," was deported in 1863 and would spend the rest of the war in exile in Canada. His "crime" was making a speech critical of Lincoln's unconstitutional usurpations of power. He accused Lincoln of borrowing money without congressional approval and of speaking "with a forked tongue," and he denounced the keystone of the Republican Party platform, the 1861 Morrill Tariff that more than doubled the average tariff rate two days before Lincoln's inauguration. He denounced the suspension of habeas corpus and the mass imprisonment of dissenters, the blockade of the Southern ports, and "a conspiracy to overthrow the present form of Federal-republican government" and "establish a strong centralized government in its stead."

That, of course, is exactly what happened. Moreover, "starting a war without the consent of Congress," said Vallandigham, "would have cost any English sovereign his head at any time within the last two hundred years."

The real purpose of the war, said the Ohio congressman, was "national banks, bankrupt laws, a vast and permanent public debt, high tariffs, heavy direct taxation, enormous expenditure, gigantic and



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stupendous speculation, ... no more state lines, no more state governments, and a consolidated monarchy or vast centralized military despotism." All of which was achieved by Lincoln's war, which is why today's leftist and Straussian historians are so worshipful of the Lincoln dictatorship.

Lincoln Wages War on Freedom of the Press

Lincoln's administration forced the shutdown of more than 300 newspapers in the Northern states that published editorials critical of him and the administration. Republican Party mobs stormed publishing places, destroying publishing equipment; and editors and owners of newspapers were imprisoned in Fort Lafayette, Fort McHenry, and other prisons. Even the grandson of Francis Scott Key, author of "The Star-Spangled Banner," was imprisoned in Fort McHenry near where his grandfather wrote the famous national song. He was a Baltimore newspaper editor who editorialized against the illegal suspension of habeas corpus.

In *Lincoln's Wrath: Fierce Mobs, Brilliant Scoundrels and a President's Mission to Destroy the Press*, authors Jeffrey Manber and Neil Dahlstrom describe how "a hundred soldiers armed with sabres and revolvers did a thorough job of wrecking the editorial offices of *The Crisis* newspaper in Columbus, Ohio." Indiana's Republican Governor Oliver Morton assisted in the shutting down of the *Terre Haute Journal and Democrat*, *Lafayette Argus*, *Rockport Democrat*, *Franklin Democrat*, and *Columbus News*. In Maine, an "angry mob" invaded the headquarters of the *Bangor Democrat* and set fire to all the furniture in the street. Literally hundreds of similar incidents occurred, Antifa style, all over the country, as documented by Manber and Dahlstrom.

The Lincoln administration also used government funds to subsidize advertising in Republican-friendly newspapers, many of which were owned by Republican Party politicians themselves. Government printing contracts were often double the price of competitively bid contracts, wrote Manber and Dahlstrom.

Election Interference

In 1861, General Nathaniel Banks informed Lincoln that every last advocate of peace in the Maryland Legislature had been imprisoned. Banks ordered troops to occupy voting places and "arrest and hold in confinement till after the election" all peace advocates, according to Sprague's *Freedom Under Lincoln*. Ballots were made of different colors so that the soldiers could identify the peace advocates and arrest them for "polluting the ballot box." Republican Party candidates won all the elections that year. Sprague concluded that "the orgy of suppression [of civil liberties in general] reached an apex" in Maryland, although similar suppression occurred in other Northern states.

The First Federal Military Conscription Law

Facing a massive desertion crisis in the Union Army, the U.S. government adopted the first federal military conscription law in 1863. The law did not apply to black people or women, and one could buy one's way out of it for \$300, a huge sum for the average working man in 1863. There were riots in various cities protesting the draft, the most famous of which were the New York City draft riots, as described in Iver Bernstein's *The New York City Draft Riots* (and portrayed quite accurately in the movie *Gangs of New York*).

The New York City draft riots occurred in early July 1863, four months after the conscription law was



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passed and a few days after the conclusion of the Battle of Gettysburg. British military officer Arthur Fremantle described the scene in *Three Months in the Southern States*, his memoir of spending three months traveling with Robert E. Lee's army:

The reports of outrages, hangings, and murder, were now most alarming, the terror and anxiety were universal. All shops were shut; all carriages and omnibuses had ceased running. No colored man or woman was visible or safe in the streets, or even in his own dwelling. Telegraphs were cut, and railroad tracks torn up. The draft was suspended, and the mob evidently had the upper hand. The people who can't pay \$300 naturally hate being forced to fight in order to liberate the very race who they are most anxious should be slaves. It is their direct interest not only that all slaves should remain slaves, but that the free Northern Negroes who compete with them for labor should be sent to the South also.

To quell the draft riots, Lincoln ordered five regiments of troops from the recently concluded Battle of Gettysburg to New York City. They shot into the crowds, killing between 300 and 1,000 citizens, according to estimates reported by Bernstein.

Military conscription is a form of enslavement that, in some cases, is even worse than chattel slavery. A slave can always hope to escape, but there is no escaping the risk of death in war. Lincoln introduced this new form of slavery to America (in addition to orchestrating the entry of West Virginia, the last slave state, into the Union).



Atlanta's first Union Station in ruins following the Battle of Atlanta in 1864 (public domain)

In *Desertion During the Civil War*, historian Ella Lonn relied on the government's official records of the war to report that there were about 200,000 deserters from the Union Army in 1862, with some 90,000 deserting on the eve of the Battle of Antietam alone. After that, the Lincoln administration adopted a policy of daily executions of captured deserters. They would be marched in front of the other soldiers, she wrote, and stood up next to an already-dug grave as a funeral march was played. They were sometimes hanged, but usually shot and dumped into the grave. Thus, once conscripted into Lincoln's army, one risked death both on and off the battlefield.



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Waging Total War on Civilians

In *When in the Course of Human Events*, Charles Adams wrote of how, by the 1860s, the concept of “just war” had essentially been codified in international law. Following the writings of Dutch legal scholar Hugo Grotius, author of *The Rights of War and Peace*, this meant that in a just war, civilians are not to be targeted; their property is not to be plundered; cities and towns occupied by civilians are not to be bombed and burned; and if food and other necessities are taken from noncombatants, they are to be paid for. Lincoln above all others reversed all of this by intentionally waging a total war of terrorism on the civilian population of the South for the entire duration of the war. This included exploding several thousand artillery shells on Charleston, South Carolina, when there was no Confederate army present; bombing the civilian population of Atlanta for four days in November 1864, littering the streets with the bodies and body parts of women, children, and babies; setting fire to every home, business, and farm building in the Shenandoah Valley; completely obliterating many small Southern towns with bombs and arson; sacking the town of Fredericksburg, Virginia; bombing and burning most of Columbia, South Carolina, and Richmond, Virginia; and killing at least 50,000 Southern civilians, according to Lincoln-worshipping historian James McPherson. All of this opened the door to the horrors of warfare in the 20th century, when millions of civilians were butchered and killed. It is little wonder that historian Lee Kennett wrote in *Marching Through Georgia: The Story of Soldiers & Civilians During Sherman’s Campaign* that, “Had the Confederates somehow won ... they would have found themselves justified ... in stringing up President Lincoln and the entire Union high command for violation of the laws of war, specifically for waging war against noncombatants.”

Lincoln’s Government of the Corporate Plutocracy, by the Corporate Plutocracy, for the Corporate Plutocracy

In his first inaugural address, Lincoln went to extreme lengths to defend Southern slavery. He started out by saying he had no intention of disturbing it and never had, and besides, it would be unconstitutional for him to do so. He pointed to the 1860 Republican Party platform that said the same. Near the end of the address, he endorsed a constitutional amendment named the Corwin Amendment, which had passed the House and Senate and would have prohibited the federal government from ever interfering with Southern slavery. I call it Lincoln’s Slavery Forever speech.

But when it came to tariff tax collection, Lincoln was belligerently uncompromising. He literally promised “invasion” and “bloodshed” in any state that failed to collect the newly doubled federal tariff tax — and kept his promise several weeks later by launching an invasion of all the Southern states.



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An 1863 \$10 legal-tender note, or “greenback” (public domain)

Lincoln’s real agenda, the political issues that had defined his political career for the previous three decades, was to bring a form of British-style “mercantilism” to America. It was the Whig Party agenda of high protectionist tariffs, a national bank run by politicians, and corporate welfare for road, canal, and railroad corporations. Lincoln’s political idol, Henry Clay, labeled this non-American, British system against which the American Revolution was fought “the American System,” borrowing the phrase from his political idol, Alexander Hamilton.

President after president had vetoed all of these policies, for the most part, beginning with Thomas Jefferson. But once the Southern Democrats seceded and the Republican Party monopolized Congress, they were all put into place during the Lincoln regime. This is the true origin of the corrupt system of “crony capitalism” that has become ever more corrupt over the generations. The National Currency Act and the Legal Tender Act did not create another central bank, but created the greenback dollar as the monopoly currency while taxing out of existence competing currencies issued by state banks. The colossal corruption of the Credit Mobilier scandal during President Ulysses Grant’s administration began with Lincoln’s Pacific Railway Act, which shoveled unprecedented government subsidies to politically connected railroad corporations. The result was incredible waste and inefficiency that eventually bankrupted the Central Pacific and Union Pacific Railroad Corporations, along with a high level of criminality and corruption.



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Sherman's March to the Sea (public domain)

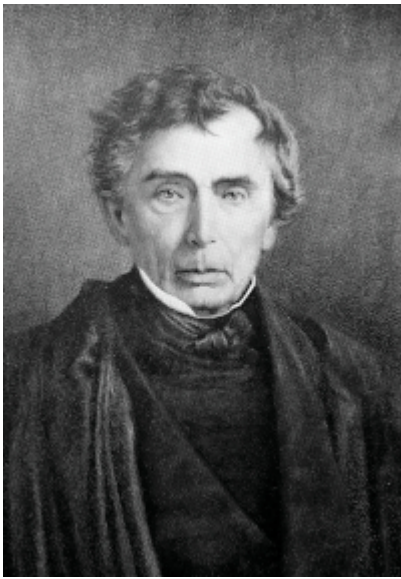
It also created many millionaires among Republican Party luminaries, and created family fortunes that last until this very day. As Dee Brown wrote in his classic history of the transcontinental railroads, *Hear That Lonesome Whistle Blow*, the massive government subsidies and all the corruption associated with them “assured the fortunes of a dynasty of American families ... the Brewsters, Bushnells, Olcotts, Harkers, Harrisons, Trowbridges, Lanworthys, Reids, Ogdens, Bradfords, Noyeses, Brooks, Cornells, and dozens of others.” Lincoln himself made a killing by investing in land in Council Bluffs, Iowa, in 1857. Then, when his Pacific Railway Act gave the president the authority to name the eastern terminus of the transcontinental railroads, he chose Council Bluffs, Iowa, on land that is known today as “Lincoln's Hill.”

The year 1857 is considered the high-water mark of free trade in the 19th century, with an average tariff tax rate of 15 percent. Lincoln signed 10 tariff-raising bills, increasing the average tariff rate to nearly 60 percent by 1865. It remained there, more or less, for the next half century. All Americans paid higher prices for items taxed with tariff taxes, but farmers were disproportionately plundered by them. All of their farm tools, equipment, clothing, shoes, etc., were more expensive, while at the same time their foreign sales were sharply reduced since protectionist tariffs impoverished their trading partners. Earning fewer dollars by selling goods in America led to fewer dollars available to foreigners with which to purchase American agricultural products. Farmers would eventually become a key voting bloc for the 1913 income tax after being promised a reduction in tariff taxes in return for their political support.



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Roger Brooke Taney (public domain)

The first income tax was adopted during the Lincoln administration. It was modest and ended after the war, but ignited a 50-year political crusade to make it permanent. It was Lincoln who gave the advocates of unlimited, unconstitutional government a taste of how that could be achieved through “progressive” income taxation (a key plank of *The Communist Manifesto*, by the way).

The Meaning of the Lincoln Memorial

The National Park Service published an online essay titled “The Meaning of the Lincoln Memorial” (completed in 1922) that purports to explain its “true meaning.” This true meaning is said to be represented by the symbol of the *fasces*, which is all over the memorial. It is an axe and a bundle of rods bound by a leather thong, and was the symbol of 20th-century fascism. It is said to represent “the higher meaning” of the memorial, says the National Park Service. It is “a symbol of power and authority” and “represented that a man held *imperium*, or executive authority.” A leader bearing such “could expect his orders to be obeyed,” and, if not, “could dole out punishment, and could even execute those who disobeyed.”

The rods of the *fasces* represent “punishment by beating,” and the axe represents “beheading.” All of this is said to represent “the power and authority of the state over the citizens, commanding respect.” No more of this silly Founding Father-like talk of how the people are to be the masters rather than the servants of their government, in other words. This, says the U.S. government, is the “true meaning” of the Lincoln Memorial.



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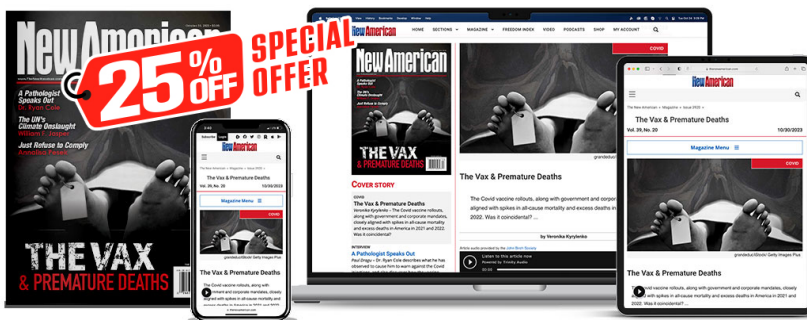
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