



OUR
LINCOLN

New Perspectives on
Lincoln and His World

Edited by
ERIC FONER



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TO THE MEMORY OF

JAMES P. SHENTON

(1925–2003)



and women to the fruits of their labor, he found his way toward a radical endorsement of citizenship rights for blacks, but not until the final years of his life did he begin to realize that for most black Americans a lifetime of hard work and the joys of citizenship could be undone by the toxic effects of racial discrimination in the states.

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Lincoln and Colonization

ERIC FONER

Abraham Lincoln, whose command of the English language surpassed that of nearly every other American president, did not produce a book during his lifetime (unless one counts the manuscript denying the divinity of the Bible that according to local lore, he wrote in New Salem, Illinois, in the 1830s and then destroyed at the urging of friends).¹ Lincoln did, however, put together two volumes of his speeches. One reproduced the Lincoln-Douglas debates. Less well known is his compilation of excerpts dealing with "negro equality."

During the 1858 Senate campaign in Illinois, Democrats persistently represented Lincoln as an abolitionist who favored "the equality of the races, politically and socially." All Republican speakers, his political adviser David Davis insisted, must "distinctly and emphatically disavow negro suffrage, negro holding office, serving on juries, and the like." William Brown, like Lincoln a former Whig member of the Illinois legislature, was running as the Republican candidate for his old seat. In October 1858, Brown asked Lincoln for material he could use to fend off Democratic charges. Lincoln assembled a scrapbook of passages that, he wrote, "contain the substance of all I have ever said about 'negro equality,'" beginning with excerpts from his celebrated Peoria speech of 1854 and ending with selections from the recent debates. Brown used the collection during the last weeks of the campaign, but both he and Lincoln lost their races. The volume remained in the possession of Brown's family

until 1900, when a collector purchased it. It appeared in print three years later with the charmingly old-fashioned title *Abraham Lincoln: His Book*.²

In a letter to Brown, Lincoln explained his stance on racial equality. "I think the negro," he wrote, "is included in the word 'men' used in the Declaration of Independence," and that slavery was therefore wrong. But inalienable natural rights were one thing, political and social rights quite another. As Lincoln explained, "I have expressly disclaimed all intention to bring about social and political equality between the white and black races." This position distinguished Lincoln from the abolitionists, who advocated the incorporation of blacks as equal members of American society, and from Democrats like his rival Stephen A. Douglas, who insisted that the language of the Declaration applied only to whites. And what did Lincoln believe should become of black Americans when slavery ended? He included in his book a passage from the Peoria speech that envisioned their return to Africa, which he called "their own native land," even though by this time nearly all the slaves had been born in the United States.³

Lincoln's embrace of colonization—the government-promoted settlement of black Americans in Africa or some other location—was no passing fancy. He advocated the policy a number of times during the 1850s and pursued it avidly during the first two years of the Civil War. In his annual message to Congress of December 1862, Lincoln stated bluntly, "I cannot make it better known than it already is, that I strongly favor colonization." Gideon Welles, the wartime secretary of the navy, later wrote that Lincoln considered colonization "inseparable" from emancipation. Welles chided "historians, biographers," and other commentators for making "slight, if any, allusion to it." This remains the case nearly a century and a half after Lincoln's death. True, for scholars like Lerone Bennett, who see Lincoln as an inveterate racist, colonization serves as exhibit number one. For Lincoln's far larger cadre of admirers, however, no aspect of his life has proved more puzzling. Don Fehrenbacher calls Lincoln's zeal in promoting colonization the "strangest feature" of his career. Many historians find it impossible to reconcile Lincoln's belief in colonization with his strong moral dislike of slavery. They either ignore his advocacy of the policy or fall back on the explanation that as a consummate pragmatist Lincoln could not have been serious about the idea of settling the African American population outside the country.⁴

David Donald, who insists that until "well into his presidency" Lin-

coln really did believe in colonization, is one of the few recent scholars to take Lincoln at his word. Most others contend that Lincoln promoted colonization as a "public relations" strategy, a way of deflecting racist attacks on the Republican Party and his administration and defusing public resistance to emancipation. One problem with this explanation is that Lincoln's advocacy of colonization predated not only his presidency but his emergence as an antislavery politician. He had pretty much dropped out of politics when he spoke enthusiastically about colonization in his 1852 eulogy of Henry Clay.⁵

I.

A new look at Lincoln and colonization must begin by taking colonization seriously as a political movement that enjoyed remarkably broad support before and during the Civil War. Under the rubric of colonization, nineteenth-century Americans put forward a wide variety of programs, some voluntary, some compulsory, for removing free blacks and slaves from the country. Absurd as the plan may appear in retrospect, it seemed quite realistic to its advocates. Many large groups had been expelled from their homelands in modern times—for example, Spanish Muslims and Jews after 1492 and Acadians during the Seven Years' War. Virtually the entire Indian population east of the Mississippi River had been removed by 1840. The mass migration of peoples was hardly unknown in the nineteenth century. In the decade following the famine of the 1840s an estimated two million men, women, and children emigrated from Ireland. In 1850 the prospect of colonizing the three million American slaves and free blacks seemed less unrealistic than immediate abolition.

The notion of settling groups of New World blacks in Africa was a truly Atlantic idea, with advocates in the United States, the West Indies, Great Britain, and Africa itself. But as *Harper's Weekly* pointed out in 1862, nowhere else in the Western Hemisphere was it proposed "to extirpate the slaves after emancipation." Indeed postemancipation societies like Jamaica, Trinidad, and British Guiana desperately strove to keep the freed people from leaving the plantations. They supplemented their labor with immigrants, free and indentured, from Europe or Asia but never considered shipping the emancipated slaves en masse elsewhere.⁶

Colonization was hardly a fringe movement. "Almost every respectable man," Frederick Douglass observed, belonged to or supported the American Colonization Society. Henry Clay and Thomas Jefferson, the statesmen most revered by Lincoln, favored colonization. So, at one time or another, did John Marshall, James Madison, Daniel Webster, Andrew Jackson, Roger B. Taney, and even Harriet Beecher Stowe (whose abolitionist novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* ends with the hero, George Harris, affirming his "African nationality" and emigrating from the United States). In an era of nation building, colonization formed part of a long debate about what kind of nation the United States was to be. It allowed its advocates to imagine a society freed from both slavery and the unwanted presence of blacks. Taking the nineteenth century as a whole, colonization needs to be viewed in the context of other plans to determine the racial makeup of American society, including Indian removal and, later, Chinese exclusion. As late as 1862 the House Committee on Emancipation and Colonization called for the removal of blacks so that "the whole country" could be occupied by whites alone.⁷

The idea of removing emancipated slaves has a long history. As early as 1715, John Hepburn, a New Jersey Quaker, published a tract advocating freeing the slaves, giving them an education, and returning them to Africa to promote the spread of Christian civilization. During the 1770s and 1780s blacks in Massachusetts and Rhode Island formulated plans for establishing an African settlement. The emigrants' virtue and industry, they argued, would refute racist assumptions about black incapacity, and by bringing Christianity, they would rescue Africans from the "heathenish darkness" in which they supposedly lived. In 1788, a year after helping to write the Constitution, James Madison proposed the creation of an African colony to promote manumission in the United States.⁸

Nearly all advocates of abolition in the revolutionary era Chesapeake, including Thomas Jefferson, believed that the end of slavery must be accompanied by the removal of the black population. Jefferson prefaced his famous discussion of blacks' physical and intellectual capacities in *Notes on the State of Virginia* with an elaborate plan for gradual emancipation and colonization. Children born to slaves after a certain date would be educated at public expense, supplied with "arms, implements of household and of the handicraft arts, seeds, pairs of the useful domestic animals," and everything else necessary for them to thrive as a "free and independent people," and transported to Africa. Simultaneously, ships

would be dispatched to other parts of the world to bring to the United States an "equal number of white inhabitants." Jefferson acknowledged that it seemed pointless to go to all this trouble to "replace one group of laborers with another." But, he warned, without colonization the end of slavery would be succeeded by racial warfare or, worse, racial "mixture." To his dying day, Jefferson remained committed to colonization. In 1824 he proposed that the federal government purchase and deport "the increase of each year" (that is, children), so that the slave population would age and eventually disappear. Jefferson, who frequently waxed sentimental about the idea of family, acknowledged that some might object on humanitarian grounds to "the separation of infants from their mothers." But this, he insisted, would be "straining at a gnat."⁹

The first emancipation—the gradual abolition of slavery in the North—was not coupled with colonization. It seems to have been assumed that the former slaves would somehow be absorbed into society. But the rapid growth of the free black population in the early republic spurred believers in a white America to action. Founded in 1816, the American Colonization Society (ACS) at first directed its efforts at removing blacks already free. At the meeting in the nation's capital that launched the society, John Randolph of Roanoke insisted that the removal of this dangerous group would "materially tend to secure" the value of slave property. The ACS was initially called the American Society for Colonizing the Free People of Color of the United States. Nonetheless, colonizationists frequently spoke of abolishing slavery gradually, peacefully, and without sectional conflict. Upper South planters and political leaders whose commitment to slavery appeared suspect dominated the ACS. None was more adamant in linking colonization with abolition than Henry Clay.¹⁰

Although a slaveholder, Clay throughout his career condemned slavery as an evil while also insisting that precipitous emancipation would create an uncontrollable population of free blacks (whom he described as "a debased and degraded set," while disclaiming any desire to "wound their feelings"). Clay began his political career in 1799 by unsuccessfully urging the Kentucky constitutional convention to adopt a plan of gradual emancipation. Fifty years later the state again revised its constitution, and Clay, now one of the country's leading statesmen, put forward a detailed proposal. Beginning in 1855 or 1860, children born to slaves would become free at age twenty-five. Colonization of those emanci-

pated was "absolutely indispensable" to the plan; otherwise "amalgamation—that revolting admixture, alike offensive to God and man," was sure to follow. Clay included a provision that until his scheme went into effect, owners would retain the right to sell slaves out of the state, thus suggesting that benefiting slaves and their children was not among his priorities. Nonetheless, the presentation of colonization as an adjunct of abolition by Clay and others helps explain why hostility to colonization became more and more intense in the Deep South.¹¹

Gradual emancipation coupled with colonization formed one part of Clay's American System, his plan for regional and national economic development that he hoped would reorient Kentucky into a modern, diversified economy modeled on the free labor North. Slavery, he insisted, was why Kentucky lagged behind neighboring states in manufacturing and general prosperity. Clay succeeded James Madison as president of the ACS in 1836 and served until his own death sixteen years later. ("He is president of nothing else," quipped Frederick Douglass.) Lincoln was in the audience in Lexington, Kentucky, in November 1847, when Clay declared slavery "a great evil" and opposed the acquisition of new territory that might lead to its expansion but rejected freeing the slaves and allowing them to remain in the country as equals. In the speech, Clay called for the gradual end of slavery and identified the American Colonization Society as an organization of "unmixed benevolence." For almost his entire career Lincoln's outlook on slavery closely paralleled that of Clay.¹²

Recent literature has emphasized the complex, indeed contradictory appeals colonizationists used in generating support for their cause. Advocates of colonization portrayed blacks, sometimes in the same breath, as depraved and dangerous outsiders, Christian imperialists, a class wronged by slavery, potential trading partners, and redeemers of Africa. The one constant was that they could not remain in America. Leonard Bacon, pastor of the First Congregational Church of New Haven, wrote that racism condemned American blacks, free or slave, to irremediable and permanent "degradation." But in Africa they would be transformed into the carriers of modern civilization and Christianity and would achieve "real freedom" for themselves. Unlike Jefferson, most proponents of colonization believed in the mutability of human character. They insisted that blacks' status as slaves and unequal free persons arose from racism, not innate incapacity. Indeed colonizationists and abolitionists agreed on one

thing: that black men and women had the capacity for improvement. As one colonization publication put it, "there is nothing in the physical, or moral nature of the African, which condemns him to a state of ignorance and degradation. . . . Light and liberty can, and do, under fair circumstances, raise him to the rank of a virtuous and intelligent being."¹³ But those "fair circumstances" could never be achieved in America.

Their actual practice often contradicted colonizationists' claim to have the best interests of blacks at heart. They opposed efforts to expand free blacks' political and civil rights, fearing that such improvements in their condition would make them less willing to emigrate. It was best, declared Elias B. Caldwell, secretary of the ACS, to keep blacks "in the lowest state of degradation and ignorance" rather than encourage hopes of advancement in the United States. The ACS proved remarkably indifferent to the welfare of those it sent abroad. Emigrants suffered a high death rate from tropical disease. Long after it was clear that they had a better chance of survival if they settled at sites on high ground, the ACS regularly unloaded them at Monrovia, the malaria-infested coastal capital of Liberia.¹⁴

Of course some African Americans shared the perspective of the colonization movement. Almost every printed report of the ACS included testimonials from blacks who either had gone to Africa or were anxious to do so. The ACS relied heavily on such statements to develop support for its program. In 1815 the black sea captain Paul Cuffe settled small groups of black Americans in Sierra Leone. John Russwurm, who in 1827 founded *Freedom's Journal*, the nation's first black newspaper, abandoned it after two years and moved to Liberia. In his final editorial, he explained why: "We consider it a waste of mere words to talk of ever enjoying citizenship in this country; it is utterly impossible in the nature of things."¹⁵

It is often forgotten that between the Revolution and Civil War, more blacks left the United States under other auspices than via the ACS. From 1816 to 1860 the ACS transported to Africa around eleven thousand people, mostly slaves manumitted by their owners for the express purpose of removal to Liberia. But between fifteen and twenty thousand escaped slaves evacuated with the British at the end of the War of Independence. They ended up in Nova Scotia, Sierra Leone, the West Indies, and even the German state of Hesse (home of the notorious Hessians). During the 1820s several thousand black Americans emigrated to Haiti, whose government promised newcomers political rights and economic opportunity

in the world's only independent black republic. The movement waned by the end of the decade, but the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 created a crisis that led to the relocation of thousands of African Americans to Canada and rekindled interest in emigration to Africa.¹⁶ When presented with a choice between slavery in the United States and freedom elsewhere, many blacks chose freedom.

Throughout the nineteenth century, however, most black Americans rejected both voluntary emigration and government-sponsored efforts to encourage or coerce the entire black population to leave the country. The similarities between the rhetoric of colonizationists and black emigrationists ought not to obscure the historical importance of the black mobilization against colonization that began immediately after the foundation of the ACS and continued through the Civil War. Indeed black hostility to colonization was one of the key catalysts for the rise of immediate abolitionism in the late 1820s and 1830s. The difference between colonization and abolitionism lay not only in their approach to getting rid of slavery but in their view as to whether blacks could hope to achieve equal citizenship in this country.

Recent work on the early republic has emphasized the persistence of abolitionist sentiment among both white reformers and free blacks. But the organized movements to eliminate slavery were white-dominated, gradualist, and linked to colonization. The militant abolitionism that emerged in the 1830s was different: immediatist, interracial, and committed to making the United States a biracial nation. This movement arose as the joining of two impulses: black anticolonization and white evangelicism and perfectionism. The founding of the ACS was quickly followed by a gathering of three thousand blacks in Philadelphia, who condemned the new society. The prominent black leaders James Forten and Richard Allen, who had supported Paul Cuffe's plan for emigration to Africa, were forced to reconsider their views because of the popular upsurge against colonization. The majority was "decidedly against me," Forten wrote. Through the attack on colonization, the modern idea of equality as something that knows no racial boundaries was born. In asserting their own Americanness, free blacks articulated a new vision of American society as a land of birthright citizenship and equality before the law, where rights did not depend on color, ancestry, or racial designation. They denied that racism was immutable, that a nation must be racially homoge-

neous, and that color formed an insurmountable barrier to equality. Antebellum black conventions regularly denounced colonization as a "gigantic fraud," an "evil trick," and the like. "We are Americans," declared the address of the Rochester Colored Convention of 1853. It spoke of blacks "not as aliens nor as exiles, but as American citizens asserting their rights on their native soil."¹⁷

David Walker's *Appeal*, a key document of radical abolitionism published in 1829, devoted its longest chapter to attacking the idea of colonization. America, Walker proclaimed, "is more our country, than it is the whites—we have enriched it with our blood and tears." He agreed with colonizationists that blacks lived in "abject" circumstances, but the cause was "the inhuman system of slavery," not innate incapacity or immutable prejudice. America, he proclaimed, could become an interracial society of equals. Walker confronted the most prominent advocates of colonization head-on. He devoted several pages to refuting Jefferson's musings on race in *Notes on the State of Virginia*. Jefferson had labeled blacks mentally inferior. "It is indeed surprising," Walker responded, "that a man of such great learning, combined with such excellent natural parts, should speak so of a set of men in chains." He blamed Jefferson for an increase in racism: "Mr. Jefferson's remarks respecting us, have sunk deep into the hearts of millions of the whites." Walker also cited Henry Clay's speech to the founding meeting of the ACS. Clay, he insisted, was not "a friend to the blacks. . . . [Slaves] work his plantation to enrich him and his family."¹⁸

The black response to colonization powerfully affected white abolitionists. In his influential pamphlet *Thoughts on African Colonization*, William Lloyd Garrison explained that his experience with the vibrant black communities of Baltimore and Boston inspired his conversion from colonization to abolition and racial equality. Like the ACS, Garrison compiled black statements—resolutions, addresses, letters—this time opposing colonization. The most potent objection to the idea, he wrote, was that it "is directly and irreconcilably opposed to the wishes of our colored population as a body." White abolitionists of the 1830s, most of whom had previously been sympathetic to colonization, now denounced the ACS for intensifying racial prejudice in America. Lewis Tappan, another former colonizationist who embraced immediate abolitionism, called on Henry Clay to recognize the ineffectiveness of the ACS.

"Slavery is rapidly increasing," he wrote to Clay in 1835. "Colonization has not, nor will it . . . diminish slavery. What is to be done? I answer, emancipate."¹⁹

II.

The assault by Walker, Garrison, Tappan, and others opened a chasm between militant abolitionism and the ACS. Colonizationists instigated and participated in the antiabolitionist riots that swept the North in the mid-1830s. Many foes of slavery abandoned the ACS. Nonetheless, while no longer the main embodiment of white antislavery sentiment, colonization survived as part of the broad spectrum of ideas relating to slavery and abolition. Before the Civil War, Lincoln lived in a world in which colonization was a significant presence. He grew up in Kentucky and southern Indiana and then lived in central Illinois among migrants from the Upper South. These were areas where the idea of colonization enjoyed considerable support. The Illinois Colonization Society, founded in 1830, attracted both genuine foes of slavery and those primarily concerned with ridding the state of free blacks. In 1833 a local colonization society was organized at Springfield, with numerous leading citizens as members, including John T. Stuart, soon to become Lincoln's first law partner. Several other close associates of Lincoln's, including David Davis and Orville H. Browning, were longtime advocates of colonization. So was William Brown, for whom Lincoln prepared his "book" in 1858.²⁰

In January 1837, Browning, then a Whig state senator, presented to the Illinois legislature a report and resolutions affirming the right to property in slaves and condemning abolitionist agitation. The resolutions passed the House 77–6, with Lincoln as one of the dissenters. Six weeks later he and fellow legislator Dan Stone issued a "protest" against the resolutions, courageous for the time and place. What is often overlooked in this episode, known to all students of Lincoln, is that even though Browning's report affirmed the constitutional right to own slaves, it was essentially a defense of colonization, not slavery. It condemned the abolitionists primarily for undermining the efforts of colonization societies to liberate "that unfortunate race of our fellow men" from "thraldom" and return them "to their own benighted land." Lincoln's "protest" differed from the resolutions in affirming the right of Congress to abolish slavery

in the nation's capital and in describing slavery as "founded on both injustice and bad policy." It concurred, however, with Browning's position that abolitionist efforts increased the evils of slavery rather than abating them. For many white Americans, including Lincoln, colonization represented a middle ground between the radicalism of the abolitionists and the prospect of the United States' existing permanently half slave and half free.²¹

Colonization organizations waxed and waned in Illinois during the 1840s and 1850s. Although some Democratic newspapers offered support, most members were Whigs "antagonistical to abolitionism," as one newspaper put it. In the 1850s Lincoln emerged as a public spokesman for colonization. His first extended discussion of the idea came in 1852, in his eulogy after Clay's death, delivered at a time when Lincoln's career in public office appeared to be over. Most eulogists hailed Clay as the Great Compromiser, the man who had almost single-handedly saved the Union in a series of sectional crises. Lincoln, by contrast, emphasized, indeed exaggerated, Clay's devotion to the "cause of human liberty." Lincoln hailed Clay for occupying a position between two "extremes": those whose assaults on slavery threatened the Union and those who looked to no end to the institution. He quoted some of Clay's procolonization speeches and embraced Clay's idea of gradual emancipation linked with returning blacks to their "long-lost fatherland." Anticipating his second inaugural address, Lincoln implied that the United States, like the ancient Egyptians, might one day suffer divine punishment for "striving to retain a captive people."

By 1853 Lincoln was closely enough identified with colonization that when the Reverend James Mitchell, a prominent colonization organizer from Indiana, came to Springfield seeking allies to promote the cause, a local minister referred him to Lincoln. Lincoln addressed the Illinois State Colonization Society's annual meetings in 1853 and 1855 (no record exists of the first speech, and only a brief outline of the second). In the year of his Senate race, 1858, Lincoln's was the first name listed among the eleven members of the society's Board of Managers. In his Peoria speech of 1854, Lincoln frankly confessed that he did not "know what to do" about slavery. His "first impulse," he said, would be to free the slaves and send them to Africa, but he admitted that the idea's "sudden execution" was "impossible." He read this passage to the audience during his first debate with Stephen A. Douglas in 1858.²²

In some ways Lincoln's colonizationism proved quite different from that of others of his time. While encouraging blacks to emigrate, he never countenanced compulsory deportation. He said little about the danger of racial mixing, except when goaded by Democrats, he declared his opposition to interracial marriage and pointed out that the more slavery expanded, the more likely it was for "amalgamation" to occur. Unlike Jefferson, Lincoln did not seem to fear a racial war if slavery was abolished, and unlike other colonizationists, he expressed little interest in the Christianization of Africa. (Lincoln's own antislavery beliefs arose from democratic and free labor convictions, not religious perfectionism.) Lincoln never spoke of free blacks as a vicious and degraded group dangerous to the stability of American society. In his 1852 eulogy, he noted that Clay believed colonization would relieve slaveowners of the "troublesome presence of the free negroes." But later in the speech, when he spoke of the "dangerous presence" in the United States, it was not free blacks but slavery.²³

In the mid-1850s, as Lincoln made the transition from Whig to Republican, Thomas Jefferson supplanted Clay as his touchstone of political wisdom. He referred repeatedly to Jefferson's belief in natural equality. Nonetheless, like Jefferson's, Lincoln's thought seemed suspended between a "civic" conception of American nationality, based on the universal principle of equality (and thus open to immigrants and, in principle, to blacks), and a 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 and believed that blacks would welcome the opportunity to depart for a place where they could fully enjoy their natural rights. "What I would most desire," he said in a speech in Springfield in 1858, "would be the separation of the white and black races."²⁴

Springfield when Lincoln lived there in the 1840s and 1850s was a small city (its population had not reached 10,000) with a tiny black population (171 persons in 1850). Nonetheless, Lincoln could not have been unaware of the black presence. In the 1850s more than 20 black men, women, and children lived within three blocks of his house. He and his wife employed at least 4 free black women to work in their home at one time or another, and Lincoln befriended William Florville, the city's most prosperous black resident. But unlike Garrison and other white abolitionists, Lincoln had little contact with politically active free blacks before the Civil War and never criticized the state's notoriously discriminatory

Black Laws. When the black abolitionist H. Ford Douglas asked him to sign a petition for their repeal, Lincoln declined.

In 1848 the Black Baptist Association of Illinois sent the Reverend Samuel Ball of Springfield to visit Africa and report on prospects for emigration. On his return, Ball praised Liberia as "the brightest spot on this earth to the colored man." But when Ball died in 1852, only thirty-four black persons had emigrated from Illinois to Liberia under the auspices of national or local colonization societies during the previous twenty years. In 1858, local blacks held a public meeting to oppose colonization. "We believe," they declared, "that the operations of the Colonization Society are calculated to excite prejudices against us, and they impel ignorant or ill disposed persons to take measures for our expulsion from the land of our nativity. . . . We claim the right of citizenship in this, the country of our birth." Lincoln made no comment on the meeting. Later that year he put together his "book" reiterating his support for colonization.²⁵

By the late 1850s the American Colonization Society seemed moribund. The *New York Herald* called its annual convention an "old foggy affair." In 1859, of a black population of four million, including nearly half a million free blacks, the ACS sent around three hundred to Liberia. "Can anything be more ridiculous," the *Herald* asked, "than keeping up such a society as this?"²⁶ Yet at this very moment the idea of colonization was experiencing a revival within the Republican Party. As in the days of Henry Clay, support centered in the border slave states and the lower Northwest.

The most avid Republican promoters of colonization were the Blair family—the venerable Francis P. Blair, once a close adviser of President Andrew Jackson's, and his sons Frank and Montgomery. They looked to Central America, not Africa, as the future homeland of black Americans and hoped that the promise of land and financial aid would make a colony attractive enough for a large number of blacks to settle there. Colonization was central to the Blairs' plan to speed the rise of the Republican Party and the progress of gradual, compensated emancipation in border states like Maryland and Missouri, where slavery was weak or in decline. In 1856, Frank Blair won election to Congress from St. Louis as an anti-slavery Democrat but soon switched parties, becoming the first Republican representative from a slave state. Montgomery played a prominent role in Maryland politics. The Blairs believed that the United States should be reserved for "the Anglo-Saxon race," while blacks would flour-

ish in the tropics, to which they were suited by nature. They attacked slavery primarily for degrading nonslaveholding whites and retarding southern economic development.²⁷

Republican endorsement of colonization, the Blairs insisted, would be "an enabling act to the emancipationists of the South." Colonization would refute the charge that abolition meant racial equality. It would have the added bonus of expanding the American commercial presence in the Caribbean (the region would become "our India") and blocking southern efforts to create a slave empire there. After the discovery of gold in California, Central America had attracted the interest of enterprising investors hoping to shorten the long sea voyage to the West Coast. In addition, in the mid-1850s the filibusterer William Walker conquered Nicaragua, established himself briefly as president, legalized slavery, and reopened the slave trade. Colonization, Frank Blair told Congress in 1858, would enable blacks—"a class of men who are worse than useless to us"—to secure American access to "the untold wealth of the intertropical region" while preventing "the propagation of slavery" there.²⁸

During the late 1850s, Frank Blair tirelessly promoted the idea of colonization in speeches throughout the North and letters to prominent Republicans. He delivered a major address touting colonization as "the only solution to the Negro question" at Cooper Union in New York one month before Lincoln's celebrated oration at the same venue. Blair won the support of a number of Republican leaders and newspapers. His converts represented all wings of the party, but most represented the western states, where Republicans were particularly sensitive to the charge of favoring "negro equality." A variety of motives inspired these endorsements, including a genuine desire to assist blacks, racial prejudice, the hope of bolstering the efforts of Upper South Republicans, and cynical politics. After Ben Wade of Ohio endorsed the idea in a Senate speech, one constituent wrote: "I like this new touch of colonizing the niggers. I believe practically it is a d—n humbug. But it will take with the people."²⁹

The Blairs made a special effort to enlist Lincoln in their cause. In February 1857, Frank Blair traveled to Springfield, where he met with "the leading men of the party," Lincoln doubtless among them. He advised them, he wrote his father, "to drop the negro and go the whole hog for the white man . . . the ground we have always taken here in St. Louis." In April, Lincoln and his partner William Herndon met in their law office

with "one of the leading emancipationists of Missouri," probably Blair, and developed a plan to promote the Republican Party in the Upper South. Two months later, in a speech on the *Dred Scott* decision at Springfield, Lincoln called for "the separation of the races," adding that while the Republican Party had not officially endorsed the idea, "a very large proportion of its members" favored it. Such separation, he added, "must be effected by colonization." Lincoln noted that in biblical times, hundreds of thousands of Israelites had left Egypt "in a body."³⁰

Like earlier colonizationists, the Blairs gathered endorsements from black leaders. The resurgence of interest in colonization among whites coincided with a rising tide of nationalism, as well as deep despair about their future in the United States, among blacks. With the Fugitive Slave Act threatening the freedom of northern blacks, the *Dred Scott* decision denying that they could be citizens, and the prospect of abolition as remote as ever, black emigration movements reemerged in the 1850s. Martin Delany advocated the creation of a new homeland for black Americans in the Caribbean, Central America, or Africa. Henry H. Garnet founded the African Civilization Society to bring about "the evangelization" of the continent by black emigrants. James T. Holly, an Episcopal minister, called for emigration to Haiti. Like the Blairs, Delany envisioned mass emigration from the United States. Most black emigrationists of the 1850s, however, looked to a select group of migrants, a talented tenth, to bring to Africa, Haiti, or Central America the benefits of Christian civilization and American economic enterprise. Success abroad, they believed, would redound to the benefit of the descendants of Africa in "our own country and in other lands."³¹

Delany and Garnet endorsed the Blair plan. Their emigration efforts sparked a sharp debate within the black community. Black conventions, previously all but unanimous in opposition to colonization, now engaged in heated discussions of the future of the race in the United States. Early in 1861 the *Weekly Anglo-African* apologized to its readers for having devoted so much space to letters, pro and con, about emigration that "our usual editorial matter is crowded out." Even Frederick Douglass, the nation's most prominent black leader, seemed to modify his long-standing opposition to emigration. For two decades Douglass had reiterated his conviction that the colonization movement strengthened slavery and racism. "No one idea has given rise to more oppression and persecution to the colored people of this country," he wrote, "than that which

makes Africa, not America, their home." But in January 1861, acknowledging that "the feeling in favor of emigration" had never been "so strong as now," Douglass offered guarded praise for the idea of migration to Haiti. He accepted an invitation to visit the island from James Redpath, the white abolitionist who headed the Haitian Emigration Bureau (funded by the government of Haiti). But at the last minute the trip was postponed. The Civil War had begun, portending, Douglass wrote, "a tremendous revolution in . . . the future of the colored race of the United States." "This," he added, "is no time for us to leave the country."³²

III.

The outbreak of war may have ended Douglass's flirtation with emigration, but from the beginning of his administration, Lincoln made known his support for colonization. His cabinet included three strong advocates of the idea: Attorney General Edward Bates of Missouri, Secretary of the Interior Caleb B. Smith of Indiana, and Montgomery Blair, the postmaster general. Even before fighting began, Elisha Crosby, the new minister to Guatemala, departed for his post carrying secret instructions, "conceived by old Francis P. Blair" and endorsed by Lincoln, to secure land for a colony of blacks "more or less under the protection of the U.S. Government." He found the presidents of Guatemala and Honduras unreceptive. One asked why the Lincoln administration did not settle blacks in its own western territory, "a question," Crosby related, "which I must confess I found very difficult to answer."³³

After fighting began, the Blairs' initiative continued. They hoped to use as guinea pigs the escaped slaves flooding into Fortress Monroe, Virginia, where General Benjamin F. Butler declared them "contraband of war" and refused to return them to their owners. "I am in favor of sending them straight to Hayti," Montgomery Blair wrote to Butler on June 8, 1861. "Suppose you sound some of the most intelligent, and see how they would like to go with their families to so congenial a clime." Around the same time, Blair approached Matías Romero, the Mexican chargé d'affaires in Washington, about the establishment of a black colony in the Yucatán. Romero forwarded the proposal to his government. But given that Mexico had recently surrendered one-third of its territory to the

United States, the prospect of further American intrusions on its soil aroused considerable opposition.³⁴

Chiriquí, on the Isthmus of Panama, then part of New Granada (today's Colombia) seemed to offer the most promising prospect for colonization. On April 10, 1861, as the crisis at Fort Sumter reached its climax, Lincoln met at the White House with Ambrose W. Thompson, head of the Chiriquí Improvement Company, who claimed to have acquired several hundred thousand acres of land in the province in 1855. He had previously proposed to the Buchanan administration to establish a mail service between New York and California via his holdings. Now he touted the region's suitability for a naval station because of its fine harbor and rich coal deposits, which colonized blacks could mine. Lincoln, according to Secretary of the Navy Welles, was "much taken with the suggestion" and pressed Welles to look into the matter. The secretary responded that the navy had no interest in a coaling station in Chiriquí, that there was "fraud and cheat in the affair," and that he doubted blacks desired to become coal miners. Undeterred, Lincoln turned the matter over to Secretary of the Interior Smith. In October 1861 he authorized Smith to agree to a contract for "coal and privileges" in Chiriquí, which, Lincoln hoped, would not only benefit the federal government but help "to secure the removal of the negroes from this country." Lincoln also asked Ninian Edwards, his wife's brother-in-law, and Francis P. Blair, Sr., to look into the Chiriquí proposal. Both reported positively. Meanwhile Frank Blair urged his brother the postmaster general to press Lincoln to approve Thompson's plans: "it is very important that there shall be *no delay* in this affair." But in view of Welles's opposition, the project, for the time being, was shelved.³⁵

As the question of emancipation moved to the forefront of political debate in late 1861 and 1862, discussion of colonization also intensified. In his annual message to Congress, delivered on December 3, 1861, Lincoln urged Congress to provide funds for the colonization of slaves freed under the First Confiscation Act as well as slaves that the border states might decide to free and to consider acquiring new territory for the purpose. A Washington newspaper suggested that the proposed black colony be called Lincolnia. The president also called for extending diplomatic recognition to Haiti and Liberia, partly to improve prospects for black emigration. Overall, commented the Washington correspondent of the

New York Times, the message took "the ancient ground of Henry Clay in regard to slavery . . . combined with the plan of Frank P. Blair, Jr." "No plan of emancipation," the reporter added, "unless accompanied by a practical scheme for colonization, will ever meet the President's assent."³⁶

Colonization, the same writer observed in January 1862, was "rapidly gaining friends in Congress." And during the spring and summer of 1862, as Congress pressed ahead with antislavery legislation, colonization played an important part in its debates. The laws providing for abolition in the District of Columbia and the confiscation of the slaves of those who supported the Confederacy—important steps on the path toward general emancipation—both included provisions for the colonization of those willing to emigrate. The Senate, however, rejected a proposal to make colonization compulsory for those freed in the nation's capital. During 1862, Congress appropriated a total of six hundred thousand dollars to aid in the transportation of African Americans. Although Lincoln appears to have had little direct influence on congressional deliberations, proponents invoked the president's name in support of colonization. When he signed the District of Columbia emancipation bill, Lincoln noted that he was "gratified" that it included "the two principles of compensation and colonization." In April, in the midst of these debates, the House appointed a Select Committee on Emancipation and Colonization, six of whose eight members represented the four border slave states, Virginia, and Tennessee. Among them was Frank Blair, and its report, issued on July 16, repeated Blair's now-familiar mantra: Fear of "inter-mixture of the races" formed the main obstacle to abolition; removing blacks would stimulate white immigration so no labor shortage would result; blacks could never achieve equality in the United States; black emigrants would be the vanguard of an American empire in the Caribbean basin.³⁷

In Congress the strongest support for colonization arose from border unionists and moderate Republicans from the Old Northwest. Radical Republicans, many of whom had long defended the rights of northern free blacks, generally opposed the idea, although some were willing to go along to placate the president and the border states. "The idea of removing the whole colored population from this country is one of the most absurd ideas that ever entered into the head of man or woman," declared John P. Hale, the Radical senator from New Hampshire. The fate of American blacks, he insisted, would be worked out in the United States.

Congressional and administration enactments in 1862 reflected these competing crosscurrents. Even while appropriating money for colonization, Congress established schools for black children in Washington, D.C., decreed that the same legal code should apply to blacks and whites in the city, and repealed the long-standing exclusion of blacks from militia service. In November, Attorney General Bates, a strong supporter of colonization, issued an opinion affirming the citizenship of free black persons born in the country (in effect overturning the *Dred Scott* decision).³⁸

The disintegration of slavery in parts of the South occupied by the Union army reinforced the Lincoln administration's commitment to colonization. By 1862 thousands of "contrabands" were within Union lines. The army found them an increasing burden, the North did not want them, and Lincoln was not yet ready to enlist the males as soldiers. Lincoln had never been a proponent of manifest destiny; unlike the Blairs, he seemed uninterested in the prospect of an American empire in the Caribbean. But his focus in 1862 on promoting border emancipation as a way of undermining the Confederacy reinforced the importance of colonization. As early as September 1861 Lincoln's longtime friend Joshua Speed had warned him from Kentucky that public opinion would never countenance "allowing negroes to be emancipated and remain among us." "You might as well," Speed commented, "attack the freedom of worship in the North or the right of a parent to teach his child to read, as to wage war in a slave state on such a principle."³⁹

When he launched his campaign for border emancipation in November 1861 by presenting a plan for gradual, compensated emancipation to Congressman George Fisher of Delaware, Lincoln did not mention colonization. He did, however, tell his old legislative colleague Browning, now representing Illinois in the U.S. Senate, that colonization "should be connected with it." Delaware opponents raised the cry that the end of slavery would lead to "equality with the white man," and Fisher quickly responded that colonization was part of the plan. Lincoln did not discuss colonization in his March 6, 1862, message to Congress in which he made his proposal for compensated emancipation public. But he seems to have concluded that unless coupled with colonization, his plan would go nowhere. According to the *New York Tribune*'s Washington correspondent, Lincoln frequently quoted the comment of Senator Garrett Davis of Kentucky that the state's unionists "would not resist his gradual eman-

cipation scheme if he would only conjoin it with his colonization plan." But Lincoln's proposal for emancipation in the border went nowhere, even though in a last-ditch appeal on July 12 he assured members of Congress from border states that land could easily be obtained in Latin America for colonization and "the freed people will not be so reluctant to go."⁴⁰

Numerous colonization schemes surfaced in the spring and summer of 1862. From Brazil, American Ambassador James Watson Webb, who as the procolonization editor of the *New York Courier and Enquirer* had helped whip up the city's antiabolition riot of 1834, proposed the creation of a joint stock company to settle black Americans along the Amazon River. A group of New Yorkers who claimed to own land in Costa Rica offered to sell it to the federal government. The Danish chargé d'affaires in Washington asked the administration to promote black emigration to St. Croix, whose sugar plantations had suffered from a "want of manual labor" since Denmark abolished slavery in 1848. (It may be doubted that many American freedmen desired to emigrate to an island whose laws required the laborer to "willingly obey" all orders of the employer and under no circumstances "presume to dictate what work he or she is to do.")⁴¹

The Chiriquí project now came back to life. In April 1862, Secretary Smith recommended that the government agree to a contract with Ambrose Thompson and advance three hundred thousand dollars to enable him to open Chiriquí's coal mines. Thus, he wrote to the president, would begin "a great national scheme which may ultimately relieve the United States of the surplus colored population." Lincoln seemed more enthusiastic about Smith's report than did any member of the cabinet. According to Welles, even Blair had "cooled off" regarding Chiriquí, if not colonization per se.⁴²

In May the Reverend James Mitchell, the Indiana colonizationist Lincoln had met in 1853 and whom, the president had recently written, "I know, and like," published, at Lincoln's request, a rambling letter to the president. Destructive as it was, Mitchell warned, the war was nothing compared with the consequences if the races were not separated: the introduction of "the blood of nearly five million Africans into the veins of the Republic" and a "struggle between the black and the white race" that would "sweep over this nation." He believed blacks would leave voluntarily but added that it would be a good idea for the government to exert "a gentle pressure." The following month, at the recommendation

of Secretary Smith, Lincoln appointed Mitchell commissioner of emigration under the Department of the Interior. Mitchell lobbied Congress on Lincoln's behalf.⁴³

As talk of colonization increased, so did black opposition. To his dismay, Mitchell found newly freed blacks "to a great extent satisfied with their new liberties and franchises" and hoping for "further enlargement" in the United States. To counteract this reluctance to emigrate, Lincoln, for the first and only time, took the idea of colonization directly to blacks. Early in July he asked Mitchell to gather a group of blacks at the White House. The emigration commissioner conveyed the invitation to African Americans assembled at one of Washington's black churches. A long discussion followed, with many speakers stating that they could not commit their people "to any measure of colonization." But as it would be discourteous to refuse to meet with the president, a committee of five was appointed. On August 14, 1862, in Mitchell's words, "in the goodness of his heart, for the first time in the history of the country," an American president "received and addressed a number of colored men." What Lincoln said, however, made this one of the most controversial moments of his entire career.⁴⁴

"You and we are different races," Lincoln told the black delegation. Because of white prejudice, "even when you cease to be slaves, you are yet far removed from being placed on an equality with the white race. . . . It is better for us both, therefore, to be separated." He offered a powerful indictment of slavery: "Your race are suffering in my judgment, the greatest wrong inflicted on any people." He refused to issue a similar condemnation of racism, although he also declined to associate himself with it. Racism, he said, was intractable; whether it "is right or wrong I need not discuss." Lincoln seemed to blame the black presence for the Civil War: "But for your race among us there could not be war." He offered removal as the remedy and touted Central America as an area of fine harbors and "rich coal mines" where even a small band of colonists might succeed. He urged blacks to "sacrifice something of your present comfort" by agreeing to emigrate. To refuse would be "extremely selfish." As the *New York Times*'s Washington correspondent observed, Lincoln's meeting with the black delegation "committed him more strongly than ever to the colonization policy as the surest solution of negro complications."⁴⁵

A stenographer was present, and Lincoln's remarks quickly appeared

in the nation's newspapers, as he undoubtedly intended. Edward M. Thomas, the delegation's spokesman, wrote to Lincoln that he found his remarks persuasive: "We were entirely hostile to the movement until all the advantages were so ably brought to our views by you." But the bulk of the antislavery public, black and white, along with many others, greeted the publication of Lincoln's remarks with dismay. "The scheme is simply absurd," wrote James Bowen, the police commissioner of New York City, "and is either a piece of charlatanism or the statesmanship of a backwoods lawyer, but disgraceful to the administration." Secretary of the Treasury Salmon P. Chase found the encounter shocking. "How much better," he remarked in his diary, "would be a manly protest against prejudice against color." A. P. Smith, a black resident of New Jersey, wrote the president: "Pray tell us, is our right to a home in this country less than your own, Mr. Lincoln? . . . Are you an American? So are we. Are you a patriot? So are we." Blacks considered it a "perfect outrage" to hear from the president that their presence was "the cause of all this bloodshed."⁴⁶

Most indignant of all was Frederick Douglass. His vision of a society that had transcended the determinism of race stood as the polar opposite of the "pride of race and blood" that Lincoln, he wrote, had revealed. "Mr. Lincoln," Douglass complained, "assumes the language and arguments of an itinerant colonization lecturer, shows all his inconsistencies, . . . his contempt for Negroes and his canting hypocrisy." Douglass pointed out that blacks had not caused the war; slavery had. The real task of a statesman, he concluded, was not to patronize blacks by deciding what was "best" for them but to allow them to be free. Fourteen years later, when Douglass delivered his famous speech at the unveiling of the statue of Lincoln in Washington, the 1862 meeting still rankled. He could not forbear to mention the day when the president "strangely told us that we were the cause of the war . . . [and] were to leave the land in which we were born."⁴⁷

Commenting on the meeting with the black delegation, a British newspaper observed, "If ever a public man was aware of the weight of his own words . . . President Lincoln must have been so." Yet Lincoln failed to consider that so powerful and public an endorsement of colonization might not only reinforce racism but encourage racists to act on their beliefs. Blacks reported that since the publication of the president's remarks they had been "repeatedly insulted, and told that we must leave

the country." The summer of 1862 witnessed a series of violent outbreaks targeting blacks. Lincoln's meeting with the black delegation, wrote the *Chicago Tribune*, "constitutes the wide and gloomy background of which the foreground is made up of the riots and disturbances which have disgraced within a short time past our Northern cities." The "kindly" Lincoln, it went on, "does not mean all this, but the deduction is inevitable."⁴⁸

Heedless of this reaction, Lincoln pressed forward. Two weeks after the meeting, he accepted an offer from Senator Samuel C. Pomeroy of Kansas to organize black emigration parties to Central America. On August 26, 1862, Pomeroy issued a public address to blacks, "sanctioned by the President," inviting one hundred families to accompany him to Chiriquí on October 1. Within a few days he had received more than enough applications. Indeed Frederick Douglass wrote Pomeroy that his two sons desired to be included, even though Douglass himself opposed the idea. On September 11, even as the pivotal military campaign that culminated in the battle of Antietam unfolded, Lincoln authorized Secretary Smith to sign an agreement with the Chiriquí company for the government to purchase land for the colonists and advance funds for the development of coal mines. The document envisioned the eventual dispatch of ten thousand men, women, and children. By October, Pomeroy claimed to have the names of more than thirteen thousand potential emigrants. Even if he exaggerated, it seems evident that some black Americans found emigration appealing. (Most appear to have been northern blacks, not contrabands or recently emancipated slaves in the nation's capital).⁴⁹

Meanwhile Lincoln pressed the case for colonization with the cabinet. He had broached the subject on July 21, eight days after he revealed to Welles that he was considering general emancipation, but the members agreed it "should be dropped." Then, on September 23, the day after issuing the Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation (which included a reference to colonizing the freed people), and again on the twenty-sixth, he stated that he thought a treaty could be worked out with a government in West Africa or Central America "to which the Negroes could be sent." It was "distinctly understood," according to Welles, that emancipation and colonization were linked. Attorney General Bates proposed compulsory deportation, but Lincoln demurred: "[T]heir emigration must be voluntary and without expense to themselves."⁵⁰

By the time of the cabinet discussion, numerous questions had arisen

about the validity of the Chiriquí company's land grant, its grandiose accounts of the region's natural resources, and the attitude of the local government. Welles considered the company's leaders "scheming jobbers" and the entire plan "a rotten remnant of an intrigue of the last administration." Thaddeus Stevens informed Chase that the House Ways and Means Committee had determined that the area was "uninhabitable" and that in any event, the company "had not a particle of a title to an inch of it." The Smithsonian Institution reported that samples of Chiriquí coal examined by a leading scientist were worthless. If loaded onto naval vessels, the coal "would spontaneously take fire." Most important, Central American governments had been complaining to Secretary of State William H. Seward about public discussion of colonies on their soil. They had no intention, they made clear, of consenting. (Nicaraguans, the American ambassador reported, claimed descent from Spanish and Indians and "feel indignant at being ranked with the North American negro.") The cabinet agreed that colonization could not go forward without the agreement of the relevant governments. On September 24 the administration suspended Pomeroy's expedition.⁵¹

A strong nationalist with a powerful sense of America's destiny as a world power, Seward was at least as enthusiastic about the prospect of an American empire in the Western Hemisphere as the Blairs. But he had long had "grave doubts" about colonization, which is no doubt why Lincoln had previously circumvented his secretary of state in promoting the idea. Seward did not believe that any significant number of blacks would emigrate voluntarily and thought the United States needed all the workers it could find. "I am always for bringing men and States *into* this Union," he remarked, "never for taking any *out*." Lincoln and Seward had become very close; as Seward's secretary George Baker recalled soon after Lincoln's death, they "never disagreed in but one subject—that was the colonization of the negroes."⁵²

Nonetheless, given Lincoln's desire to work out a colonization treaty, Seward on September 30 addressed a circular to the governments of Britain, France, the Netherlands, and Denmark, owners of colonial possessions in the Caribbean basin, offering to enter into agreements to colonize American blacks on their territory. Few of the governments seemed interested. By the end of October, Secretary Smith was forced to admit that the administration now had "no settled policy" regarding col-

onization. But a month later Lincoln was still writing to Chase that he hoped a Chiriquí contract could be arranged.⁵³

If Lincoln had hoped that his embrace of colonization would reconcile opponents to emancipation, the elections of 1862 proved him wrong. Colonization rarely came up during political debates that fall. Republicans supported the emancipation policy on antislavery or military grounds. They said little about colonization, although many assured northern audiences that blacks naturally gravitated to warm climates and would leave the North for the South once slavery had been abolished. Democrats were not appeased by Lincoln's continuing references to colonization. They ridiculed the idea of compensated emancipation and colonization as unconstitutional, prohibitively expensive, and unworkable. Republicans' unwillingness to countenance compulsory deportation, they asserted, showed that colonization was a fraud. Instead, emancipation would unleash "a swamy inundation of negro laborers and paupers" upon the North. Raising lurid racial fears paid electoral dividends: The Democrats captured the governorship of New York and gained thirty-four seats in the House of Representatives.⁵⁴

In his annual message to Congress in December 1862, Lincoln reiterated his commitment to colonization. He asked for a constitutional amendment authorizing Congress to appropriate funds for the purpose, along with two others offering funds to states that provided for emancipation by the year 1900 and compensating owners of slaves who had gained freedom as a result of the war. Lincoln also claimed that the administration was continuing its efforts to sign treaties for the "voluntary emigration" of blacks and chided them for being unwilling to leave the country. Colonization, he maintained, would benefit whites: "Labor is like any other commodity on the market. . . . Reduce the supply of black labor by colonizing the black laborer . . . and . . . you increase the demand for and the wages of white labor." But at the same time he directly addressed white racial fears, offering an extended argument as to why if freed slaves remained in the United States, they would pose no threat to the white majority.

The December message was both a preparation of public opinion for the Emancipation Proclamation less than a month hence and a last offer to the border and Confederate states of a different path to abolition—gradual, compensated emancipation coupled with colonization. Lincoln's

scheme would have had the government issue interest-bearing bonds to be presented to slaveowners, with the principal due when slavery ended in their states. He offered an elaborate set of calculations to prove that despite the economic value of slave property — over three billion dollars, an enormous sum—the growth of the white population through natural increase and immigration would make the burden of taxation to pay off the bonds less and less onerous as time went on. Lincoln was betting that the white population would grow faster than the black, an outcome that colonization would ensure. (This argument, however, seemed to contradict his assurance that by reducing the amount of available labor, colonization would raise whites' wages.) Without colonization, Lincoln said, the black population might grow faster than the white, dramatically increasing the cost of his plan.⁵⁵

That Lincoln remained committed to colonization became apparent on December 31, 1862, the day before he issued the Emancipation Proclamation. With Senator James R. Doolittle of Wisconsin, one of the most avid proponents of colonization in Congress, present, Lincoln signed a contract with Bernard Kock to transport blacks to Île à Vache (Cow Island), eight miles off the coast of Haiti. Kock had persuaded the Haitian government to grant him the right to cut timber on the island. In the fall he had had a public letter to Lincoln printed extolling the resources of this "beautiful, healthy, and fertile island" and offering to assist in "your philanthropic idea of Colonization." Lincoln's commissioner of emigration, James Mitchell, lobbied on Kock's behalf. Less enthusiastic was Attorney General Edward Bates, who described Kock to Lincoln as "an errant humbug . . . a charlatan adventurer." But the president agreed that Kock would be paid fifty dollars each for transporting five thousand blacks to Cow Island. Doolittle and the Blairs were overjoyed. They believed, according to Elizabeth Blair Lee, the sister of Frank and Montgomery, "it is the beginning of the 2nd great Exodus."⁵⁶

IV.

On January 1, 1863, blacks gathered in churches throughout the North and occupied South to await news of the Emancipation Proclamation. "I have never witnessed," the abolitionist Benjamin Rush Plumly wrote to Lincoln from Philadelphia, "such intense, intelligent and devout 'Thanks-

giving.'" The mention of Lincoln's name "evoked a spontaneous benediction from the whole Congregation." "The Black people all trust you," Plumly reported. When a member of the congregation suggested that "you might be forced into some form of colonization," a woman shouted, "'God won't let him,' . . . and the response of the congregation was emphatic." The process of deifying Lincoln as the Great Emancipator had begun.⁵⁷

The Emancipation Proclamation represented a turning point in the Civil War and in Lincoln's own views regarding slavery and race. In crucial respects, it differed markedly from Lincoln's previous statements and policies. It was immediate, not gradual, contained no mention of compensation for slaveowners, and said nothing about colonization. For the first time it authorized the enrollment of black soldiers into the Union military (the Second Confiscation Act had envisioned using blacks as military laborers, not "armed service" as the Emancipation Proclamation provided). The proclamation set in motion the process by which in the last two years of the war 180,000 black men served in the Union army, playing a critical role in Union victory. It enjoined emancipated slaves to "labor faithfully for reasonable wages"—in the United States.⁵⁸

After issuing the Emancipation Proclamation, Lincoln made no further public statements about colonization. But he did not immediately abandon the idea. On January 30, after meeting with an official of the Pennsylvania Colonization Society, he directed the Interior Department to advance money to a black minister who wanted to establish a settlement in Liberia. Early in February, Lincoln told William P. Cutler, a Radical Republican congressman from Ohio, that he was still "troubled to know what we should do with these people—Negroes—after peace came." (Cutler replied that he thought the plantations would continue to need their labor.) Meanwhile Ambrose W. Thompson tried to revive interest in his Chiriquí plan. He reminded Lincoln of his "address to the Negro committee" and blamed fear that blacks were to be "on a par with the white man" for Republican setbacks in the 1862 elections.⁵⁹

Nothing came of Thompson's plans, but throughout the spring, John P. Usher, a proponent of colonization who had succeeded Smith as secretary of the interior, continued to promote various schemes. In April, he met with John Hodge, a representative of the British Honduras Company, "comprising . . . some of the leading banker capitalists, and merchants of London" and owner of "valuable lands" in desperate need of

labor. Hodge hoped the administration would help him transport fifty thousand black indentured laborers to that colony or even "a much larger number." (If blacks were not interested, Hodge related, he would bring in "Coolies from India and China.") Lincoln gave Hodge permission to visit contraband camps in Virginia "to ascertain their willingness to emigrate." But Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton refused, since the army was now recruiting able-bodied men for military service. "The mission failed," reported the *New York Times*, "and the gentleman went home."⁶⁰

Thus in the spring of 1863 it was Secretary Stanton, not Lincoln, who called a halt to colonization efforts. "The recent action of the War Department," Usher commented ruefully, "prevents the further emigration from the U.S. of persons of African descent for the present." But as late as the fall of 1863 Usher was still using Interior Department funds to assist individual blacks who wished to leave for Africa, and James Mitchell was still working to organize "a proper body of discreet colored men" to undertake an emigration project.⁶¹

Meanwhile border unionists clung to the idea of colonization. In January and February 1863 congressmen from Missouri and Maryland introduced bills to provide funds for gradual, compensated emancipation in their states and the colonization of those freed. One such measure passed the House but never came to the Senate floor. The Blairs continued their propaganda effort, now using colonization as a weapon against radicals in the border and northern states who were calling for immediate and total abolition and the granting of civil equality to the former slaves. Such demands, Montgomery Blair declared in a June 1863 speech in New Hampshire, were a recipe for "blending the two colors to make a third." Blair anticipated Andrew Johnson's notorious speeches during Reconstruction by equating secessionists and abolitionists—the "Calhoun and [Wendell] Phillips Juntas"—both of whom, he claimed, opposed "the plan of Jefferson and Lincoln": emancipation and colonization. In a speech in the House in February 1864, Frank Blair excoriated those who wished to elevate blacks to equality with whites. He claimed that colonization was still the "humane, wise, and benevolent policy" of the president.⁶²

By 1864, however, the influence of the border states was on the wane, and the Blairs' tirades, influential Republicans informed Lincoln, had made them "odious" to rank-and-file members of the party and done the president "immense harm," since they claimed to be speaking for the

administration. In September, Lincoln asked Montgomery Blair to resign from the cabinet as part of an effort to win Radical support for his reelection.

The declining importance of the border was only one among many reasons why Lincoln's commitment to colonization faded in the last two years of the war. The service of black soldiers strongly affected his outlook. When the Emancipation Proclamation was issued, the black abolitionist H. Ford Douglas predicted that the progress of the war would "educate Mr. Lincoln out of his idea of the deportation of the Negro." Like Martin Delany, another prewar emigrationist, Douglas himself enlisted and was eventually commissioned as one of the few black officers. Lincoln would indeed come to believe that in fighting for the Union, black soldiers had staked a claim to citizenship and political rights in the postwar world. One of his secretaries, William O. Stoddard, wrote in July 1863 that "arming the negroes" was creating a "new race of freemen, who will take care of the South and of themselves too" when the war ended. In his famous letter to James C. Conkling defending his emancipation policy in August 1863, Lincoln contrasted the war's white critics with the black soldiers, who "have helped mankind on to this great consummation" of preserving the American republic.⁶³

In addition, contact with articulate black spokesmen like Frederick Douglass, Martin Delany (whom Lincoln called "this most extraordinary and intelligent black man"), Sojourner Truth, Bishop Daniel A. Payne of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, and representatives of the propertied, educated free black community of New Orleans, seemed to broaden Lincoln's racial views. Simultaneously, the widespread interest in colonization members of Congress had evinced in 1862 evaporated. Republicans of all persuasions assumed blacks would form the South's agricultural labor force after the war had ended. When Congress in the spring of 1864 debated the Thirteenth Amendment abolishing slavery, no one supporting the measure promised to colonize the freed people.⁶⁴

The fiasco at Île à Vache also contributed to the demise of colonization. Early in 1863, Secretary of State Seward convinced Lincoln to delay the implementation of the colonization contract he had signed with Bernard Kock on the eve of issuing the Emancipation Proclamation. In March, Kock transferred the contract to two Wall Street brokers, Paul S. Forbes and Charles K. Tuckerman, whom he convinced that Île à Vache was the perfect place to grow Sea Island cotton. They invested seventy

thousand dollars in his scheme. Later that month Tuckerman met with Lincoln and persuaded him to approve a new contract with himself and Forbes for the transportation of five hundred blacks to the island. Tuckerman appointed Kock to oversee the project.⁶⁵

On April 17, 1863, Kock and more than 450 men, women, and children embarked from Fortress Monroe. Reports soon began to filter back of destitution and unrest among the colonists. In the fall Usher dispatched an agent to report on conditions there. It turned out that Kock had declared himself "governor," taken the emigrants' money, and issued scrip printed by himself—at a profit of 50 percent—to be the sole currency on the island. When they disembarked, the settlers found three dilapidated sheds and no medical facilities. Funds that were supposed to have been used to build housing had instead been spent on "handcuffs and leg-chains and the construction of stocks for their punishment." The irate colonists soon drove Kock from the island. By the end of the year dozens had perished and others had left for the mainland of Haiti. In February 1864, Lincoln ordered Secretary of War Stanton to send a ship to bring back the survivors.⁶⁶

Thus ended the only colonization project actually undertaken by the Lincoln administration. The *Chicago Tribune* entitled an editorial on the debacle "The End of Colonization." The disaster convinced Secretary Usher to abandon the entire policy. As he explained to Lincoln, despite "the great importance which has hitherto been attached to the separation of the races," colonization was dead. He viewed its demise philosophically: "Time and experience, which have already taught us much wisdom, and produced so many consequent changes, will, in the end, solve this problem for us also." Claiming that they had violated the contract, Usher refused to pay Tuckerman and Forbes the money due for transporting the colonists, although Lincoln's successor, Andrew Johnson, later appointed Tuckerman ambassador to Greece. The Senate launched an investigation, and in July 1864 Congress froze its previous appropriation for colonization. In the end only thirty-eight thousand of the six hundred thousand dollars had been spent, mostly to cover Pomeroy's expenses in 1862. (The action of Congress led Usher, who had never much liked Mitchell, to cut off the emigration commissioner's salary and evict him from his office. With the approval of Attorney General Bates, July 1, 1864, Lincoln's secretary John Hay noted in his diary, "I am glad

that the President has sloughed off the idea of colonization. I have always thought it a hideous and barbarous humbug." This was not accurate, as Hay, whose opinions generally reflected Lincoln's, had strongly favored the idea in 1862.⁶⁷

In 1863 and 1864, Lincoln for the first time began to think seriously of the role blacks would play in a postslavery world, what kind of labor system should replace slavery, and whether some blacks should enjoy the right to vote. In the Sea Islands reformers were establishing schools for blacks and aiding them in acquiring land. In the Mississippi Valley former slaves were being put to work on plantations. Lincoln expressed increasing interest in how these experiments fared. In August 1863 he instructed General Nathaniel P. Banks to include as part of wartime Reconstruction in Louisiana a system whereby "the two races could gradually live themselves out of their old relation to each other, and both come out better prepared for the new," mentioning especially "education for young blacks." In February 1864 he sent General Daniel E. Sickles to the Mississippi Valley to report, among other things, on "the colored people—how they get along as soldiers, as laborers in our service, on leased plantations, and as hired laborers with their old masters." Two months later he privately suggested to Governor Michael Hahn of Louisiana that the state's new constitution allow educated free blacks and black soldiers to vote. After winning a second term, Lincoln did try, one last time, at the Hampton Roads peace conference of February 1865, to revive the old idea of compensated emancipation and, it seems, alluded to the possibility of gradual abolition. He made no mention of colonization. "We shall hear no more of that suicidal folly," declared a contributor to the black-run *New Orleans Tribune*.⁶⁸

The dream of a white America did not die in 1865, nor did black emigration efforts or proposals by white racists to expel the black population. But the end of slavery meant the end of colonization. It was Frederick Douglass who during the Civil War offered the most fitting obituary. In a reply to a letter by Montgomery Blair promoting colonization, Douglass dismantled one by one the arguments for the policy. There was no such thing as a people's being naturally fitted for a particular climate; blacks had adapted to America and, more, had become Americans, not Africans. The idea of colonization allowed whites to avoid thinking about the aftermath of slavery. It was an "opiate" for a "troubled conscience," Douglass wrote, which deflected attention from the work of

emancipation and denied free blacks the incentive of citizenship to inspire self-education and hard work. Only with the death of colonization could Americans begin to confront the challenge of making this an interracial democracy.”

As for Lincoln, his long embrace of colonization suggests that recent historians may have been too quick to claim him as a supremely clever politician who secretly but steadfastly pursued the goal embodied in the Emancipation Proclamation or as a model of political pragmatism in contrast with the fanatical abolitionists. For what idea was more utopian and impractical than this fantastic scheme? Indeed, one Republican newspaper likened it to Charles Fourier’s plan to construct a “paradise” on earth for mankind. “The future historian of the period,” *Harper’s Weekly* predicted in 1862, would find it difficult to decide which was “the more insane”: the idea of a southern Confederacy or “the efforts of the loyal government” to export the South’s labor force.⁷⁰ For a political pragmatist, Lincoln seriously misjudged the likelihood of the border states’ adopting emancipation, even when coupled with colonization, and the willingness of most black Americans to leave the country of their birth. Even more profoundly, he overestimated the intractability of northern racism as an obstacle to ending slavery. In fact, for a variety of reasons, the majority of the northern public came to accept emancipation without colonization. Perhaps the much-maligned abolitionists, who insisted that slavery could be ended with the freed people remaining in the United States, were more realistic.

In the last speech before his death, Lincoln spoke publicly for the first time of suffrage for some blacks in the reconstructed South, notably the men “who serve our cause as soldiers.”⁷¹ Rejection of colonization after so prolonged an embrace had been necessary before Lincoln came to advocate even partial civil and political equality for blacks. He had come a long way from the views he brought together in 1858 in *Abraham Lincoln: His Book*.