

Keep Lincoln on His Pedestal

By Thomas Carson

Many historical figures who were once greatly admired are now drawing severe criticisms for their racial views and alleged racism. Abraham Lincoln is among them. The San Francisco school board has removed Lincoln's name from a high school. In Chicago and other cities, people are calling for the removal of his statues from public places.

Lincoln said and did things regarding racial issues that now make him look very bad. He pandered to the racial prejudices of Illinois voters during the Lincoln-Douglas debates (for evidence about those prejudices, see my book *Lincoln's Ethics*, pp. 110-114 and 356-357). Among other things, he said that he opposed giving voting rights to African Americans. The dispossession of Native Americans continued during Lincoln's presidency. But these criticisms are half-truths that fail to mention how his views later changed and improved. Lincoln's last speech expressed his desire to extend voting rights to many African American men. John Wilkes Booth listened to this speech and murdered him for that reason. Lincoln knew that Native Americans were unjustly treated and, on several occasions, he expressed his desire to end those injustices after the Civil War, when he was no longer consumed by his duties as commander in chief. His detractors seldom acknowledge that he rose far above the extreme racial prejudices of his time and place by the end of his life.

Lincoln's extraordinary achievements *greatly outweigh* the bad and morally questionable things he said and did. He was a very great leader who did more than anyone else to end American slavery. Standard histories of the Civil War understate the difficulty of what he did and the magnitude of his achievements. He is fully worthy of the great honor he has long enjoyed.

He united most people in the North and the Border States (the four slave states that remained in the Union) to fight a war to keep the nation together. In 1861, many abolitionists, including Frederick Douglass and William Garrison, opposed fighting a war to preserve the Union. They were badly mistaken about this. Had Lincoln made abolishing slavery a war aim in 1861 he would not have had enough support to win the Civil

War, something that Douglass later acknowledged in his 1876 speech at the dedication of the Freedman's Memorial to Lincoln. The independence of the Confederacy would have been much worse than the *status quo ante*.

Many histories of the Civil War, with their graphs of relative populations and industrial output, greatly overstate the likelihood of a Union victory. To gain its independence, the Confederacy needed only to avoid being conquered before the other side tired of war. The Union needed to conquer a very hostile nation with a land area almost as large as European Russia, which had swallowed up Napoleon's Grand Army.

The Lincoln myth that many of us were taught in school leaves out some important things he said and did that cast him in a very bad light. But the sanitized myth and the contemporary counter-narratives of Lincoln's detractors do not adequately explain the intense anti-black racism of Lincoln's time and place (for evidence, see my book's pp. 59-60, 96, and 356-359). That racism harmed him politically when he expressed enlightened views about racial issues, and it also made it extremely difficult for him to sell the public on the idea of sacrificing, fighting, and *dying in enormous numbers* to free enslaved people. Lincoln is a great hero of the history most of us were taught in school, but that history still understates the difficulties he had to overcome in order to accomplish what he did, and it doesn't acknowledge how very improbable it was that the Union would both win the Civil War and end slavery in a little more than four years.

It is unfair to judge Lincoln by his worst moments, especially since many of his later moments were much better. The best measure of a leader is whether she is instrumental in improving things and making things more just. Judged by *that standard*, Abraham Lincoln is one of the very greatest leaders in American history and fully deserves his place of great honor in our national memory.

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