The American media and the Lincoln bicentenary

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February 12, the bicentenary of Abraham Lincoln's birth, afforded an occasion for the American media to serve up shallow and cynical comparisons of Lincoln to President Barack Obama.

Attempts to portray Obama as the heir of Lincoln's legacy involve a grotesque historical and political falsification. Lincoln will forever be associated with one of the great progressive causes in history—the emancipation of the slaves and the destruction of the Southern slave-owning oligarchy in the American Civil War (1861-1865).

Obama, on the other hand, bears only a negative and reactionary relationship to the great political questions of his day. His candidacy for the presidency aimed to absorb and defuse widespread hostility toward the war in Iraq and the Bush administration, while permitting the American ruling elite to make certain tactical adjustments in its policies. The real aims of Obama's presidency are to intensify imperialist war in Central Asia and force the working class to pay for the massive economic crisis.

However, this did not prevent an ignorant media "celebration" of the supposed Lincoln-Obama connection on Thursday. Evident in the coverage was a level of political calculation aimed to give Obama a boost by associating his name and presidency with that of Lincoln.

The media coverage of Lincoln demonstrates its enormous ignorance and intellectual decay. Whatever the immediate aims, the effect of the media's Lincoln-Obama coverage is to falsify history and stupefy historical consciousness. For example, a person suffering through CNN's daylong segment, "From Lincoln to Obama," would have learned next to nothing about the Civil War—the processes that led up to it, its legacy, and Lincoln's role in it.

Substituting for the epochal historical questions were other concerns. At the center of the media equation of Lincoln and Obama was, once again, the question of race. The reasoning goes that because Obama is African American, he represents the culmination of Lincoln's project of freeing the slaves. In this vein, Harold Holzer, a historian and co-chair of the United States Lincoln Bicentennial Commission, told *USA Today* that Obama is "helping to complete the unfinished work of American democracy that Lincoln spoke about at Gettysburg."

This "connection" is politically and historically fraudulent. Instead, Obama's victory represents the culmination of a process of much more recent vintage. Beginning in the early 1970s, the American ruling class consciously sought to cultivate a layer of black capitalists and politicians as a means of defusing the explosive social struggles of black workers that had emerged around the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, and the ghetto uprisings of the late 1960s.

In terms of both his political outlook and his personal history, Obama bears no connection to the mass strivings of black workers. His administration will do nothing to alleviate the social conditions of the working class as a whole, much less African American workers, who remain, a century-and-a-half after emancipation, an exceptionally exploited part of the US population. Every social index—pertaining to income, unemployment, health, education, incarceration—affirms this.

The media also made frequent note of the fact that Obama enters office having "inherited" two wars from the previous administration. This, they said, compared to Lincoln confronting the Civil War within weeks of his inauguration.

This equation is truly brazen in its falsification of history. The Civil War was a great progressive cause that resulted in the destruction of human bondage in the US. It drew into political life the overwhelming majority of the country, including the slaves in the South, who used the presence of the Union Army to strike out against their masters. In a political and economic sense, the Civil War was the culmination of the American Revolution, preparing the way for a massive expansion of the productive forces.

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are imperialist wars that have killed well over a million innocent people, men, women, and children, and made millions more homeless. As regards the people of Iraq and Afghanistan, the wars' chief aim is to terrorize and enslave through all the methods of imperialism—collective punishment, torture, summary executions, and bribery. More broadly, the wars mark a desperate attempt by moribund American capitalism to offset its longstanding decline by seizing markets and strategic advantages over its rivals.

In this regard, the Iraq and Afghanistan wars have far more in common with the Mexican American War (1846-1848) and the historically-doomed southern slavocracy whose expansionist interests that war aimed to benefit. Lincoln, it must be recalled, was a principled opponent of the Mexican American war, denouncing it in an 1848 speech as unconstitutional and quitting politics for some time in its wake.

Obama's "opposition" to the war in Iraq has always been unprincipled. He has never called it illegal. From his days in the

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Illinois state legislature, his criticisms were always launched with a view toward the strategic risks to US imperialism; the imperialist adventure in Afghanistan, he has argued, is far more crucial. Now as president, Obama has retreated from promises to end the war in Iraq, while carrying through on his oath to escalate military violence in Afghanistan and Pakistan. "Opposition" of Obama's variety in the 1840s might have criticized the Mexican American war from the standpoint that Cuba should have been wrested from Spain first (in fact Cuba was a cherished target of the southern oligarchy.)

The media also used the occasion of the Lincoln bicentenary to resume a campaign to associate Obama's cabinet with Lincoln's, who, the story goes, surrounded himself with opponents. CNN interviewed Doris Kearns Goodwin, author of *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln*, a book which has supplied the media with seemingly endless fodder for Obama comparisons. After briefly quizzing Goodwin about Lincoln's decision to introduce Republican Party rivals into his wartime cabinet, a CNN news anchor got to the real point of the interview: "Do you see parallels with Barack Obama on that front? I mean, again, he had in his cabinet people who at one point [were] running against him. But are they also, you know, fighting, arguing over every point?"

Goodwin replied, "I think what Obama has realized is that it's important to have people who can disagree with you without fear of consequence and that way, you're going to be able to not have an echo chamber that follows you around. And he is willing to take the risk that some of these things may leak out, they have different opinions, but I think it's a healthy confidence that he possesses much like Mr. Lincoln did."

The analogy is not only superficial—reducing great historical questions to personal relationships—but fundamentally false. Whereas Obama's cabinet picks—such as Hillary Clinton for secretary of state and Robert Gates for secretary of defense—represented a clear repudiation of his ostensible opposition to the war in Iraq and a kowtowing to the right, Lincoln's cabinet rivals, including William Seward and Salmon Chase, shared his opposition to slavery and commitment to the defense of the union.

In an earlier perspective on this cabinet comparison, the *World Socialist Web Site* noted, "Lincoln did not invite rivals into his cabinet who disagreed with him on basic questions of principle, such as Illinois Senator Stephen Douglas, who represented the northern wing of the Democratic Party in the 1860 election and who advocated further concessions to the southern elite on the slavery issue, or John C. Breckinridge, the candidate of the Democratic Party's southern wing, who favored the expansion of slavery. To have matched Obama's cynicism, Lincoln would have needed to appoint Douglas as secretary of state and Breckinridge as secretary of war. (See "Obama's Team of Reactionaries," 8 December, 2008)

The media made numerous attempts to equate Obama and Lincoln as orators and writers. For example, David Jackson of *USA Today* called Obama's phrases "reminiscent of those of Abraham Lincoln."

Such comparisons are an affront to Lincoln and, to be frank, the English language. While he has occasionally interspersed his speeches with phrases from Lincoln, Obama can be considered an eloquent speaker only to the extent that he is measured against his semi-literate predecessor in the White House.

The power of Lincoln's memorable speeches and formulations rest in his ability to convey powerful democratic ideas by means of a language beautiful in its simplicity and infused by the talents of a storyteller and devotee of Shakespeare. He remains a literary giant whose speeches have made an indelible mark on English prose.

Obama's key phrases, such as "change we can believe in" and "yes, we can!" are only memorable—or unforgettable?—because they have been drummed into public consciousness with a billion-dollar marketing blitz, much like the "Got Milk?" campaign.

Obama himself has consciously sought to drape himself in the mantle of Lincoln. He spoke in Lincoln's hometown of Springfield, Illinois to commemorate the latter's birth. In keeping with his efforts toward "bipartisanship," Obama essentially depicted Lincoln as ... an early Obama. What Lincoln "never forgot," Obama claimed, "not even in the midst of civil war, was that despite all that divided us—north and south, black and white—we were, at heart, one nation and one people, sharing a bond as Americans that could not break."

While Lincoln exhibited magnanimity in his approach to the South as a region, he never compromised in his initial principle of preserving the union and, after January 1, 1863, in freeing the slaves—in spite of enormous pressure within the North to make peace overtures—pressure that mounted until the autumn of 1864 and General Sherman's capture of Atlanta, Georgia. Lincoln never vacillated in his opposition to the Kansas-Nebraska Act. And he never offered a virtual veto over his political program to parties defeated in the 1860 and 1864 elections, as Obama has done with the discredited Republican Party of 2008.

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