Steven Spielberg's Lincoln and the historical drama of the Civil War

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Directed by Steven Spielberg, written by Tony Kushner

Lincoln, which will be released in theaters nationally November 16, is a powerful cinematic treatment of the Lincoln administration's struggle to pass a constitutional amendment abolishing slavery in 1865, the final year of the American Civil War.

The film centers on the period of the "lame duck" Congress in early 1865, the fourth year of the Civil War, after the electorate had handed Lincoln and the Republicans a crushing victory in the 1864 elections over the Democrats, who opposed emancipation. It follows the political struggle to pass the Thirteenth Amendment through the House of Representatives—it had been passed by the Senate the previous year—amidst deep war-weariness in the North and against the backdrop of a mounting sentiment in favor of a negotiated peace with the South within the Republican Party itself.

The screen is populated by real historic figures, first and foremost Lincoln, played by Daniel Day-Lewis. Also present are First Lady Mary Todd Lincoln (Sally Field), Congressman and radical Republican Thaddeus Stevens (Tommy Lee Jones), Secretary of State William Seward (David Strathairn), conservative Republican Francis Preston Blair (Hal Holbrook), New York City "Copperhead" Democratic politician Fernando Wood (Lee Pace), Union general Ulysses S. Grant (Jared Harris), Confederate Vice President Alexander Stephens (Jackie Earle Haley), and many, many others.

The considerable strength of the film, directed by Steven Spielberg and written by Tony Kushner, rests in its detailed presentation of the extraordinary history surrounding the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment. This took Kushner beyond the work of Doris Kearns Goodwin's Lincoln biography *Team of Rivals*, upon which the film is partly based.

In an interview with the *Wall Street Journal*, Kushner acknowledged several important sources, including James McPherson's magisterial *Battle Cry of Freedom*, writings on Lincoln by Alan Guelzo, and Lincoln's own letters. The filmmakers have paid careful attention to historical accuracy, from lighting (the film attempts to recreate the sort of oil-based illumination of the day) to language (much of the dialogue is selected from the historical record, including speeches from the floor of the US House of Representatives.)

The film brings Abraham Lincoln to life in a way that comes close to Karl Marx's unsurpassed description of the man. Lincoln was a figure, Marx wrote, "neither to be browbeaten by adversity, nor intoxicated by success, inflexibly pressing on to his great goal, never compromising it by blind haste, slowly maturing his steps, never retracing them, carried away by no surge of popular favor, disheartened by no slackening of the popular pulse, tempering stern acts by the gleams of a kind heart, illuminating scenes dark with passion by the smile of humor, doing his titanic work as humbly and homely as Heaven-born rulers do little things with the grandiloquence of pomp and state; in one word, one of the rare men who succeed in becoming great, without ceasing to be good. Such, indeed, was the modesty of this great and good man, that the world only discovered him a hero after he had fallen a martyr."

Much of the credit for recreating this Lincoln must go to the extraordinary efforts of British-born actor Daniel Day-Lewis. In his performance, Lincoln appears to deliberate carefully about every word, always ahead of his interlocutors, thoughtfully assessing the political meaning hidden behind their positions. Lincoln comes across as both a shrewd politician and a leader whose policies were ultimately rooted in principle—above all else, the principle of equality.

"We began with equality, that's the origin isn't it? That's justice," the film has Lincoln say in an obvious reference to the Declaration of Independence. Day-Lewis manages to fuse the politician—Kearns Goodwin's rather narrow focus—to the principled man "never compromising … by blind haste, slowly maturing his steps, never retracing them."

Day-Lewis is facilitated by Kushner, who must be credited for allowing Lincoln's own words to form much of the script. The film opens with Lincoln near a battlefield meeting Union soldiers, white and black, who together recite to him his already famous Gettysburg address, and its assertion that the war was for "a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth."

The film closes, in the wake of Lincoln's assassination, with a flashback to his Second Inaugural address, movingly rendered by Lewis. "Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away," Lincoln says. "Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondsman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said 'the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.'"

In between these bookends the dialogue is interspersed with Lincoln's yarns, jokes and metaphors. These were not merely illustrations of "downhome" folksy American English. Lincoln's rhetoric, infused not only with the color and common sense of the American frontier, but with Biblical metaphor and Shakespearean tragedy (which he could recite from memory), provided a language for understanding and acting through politics in the Civil War. In James McPherson's phrase, Lincoln "won the war with metaphors."

To cite one example from the film, Lincoln, a self-educated student

of mathematics, calls upon Euclid to help determine whether or not to allow a Southern peace delegation to visit the White House. “Euclid’s first common notion is this,” Lincoln tells a young telegraph operator, “things which are equal to the same thing are equal to each other. That’s a rule of mathematical reasoning. It’s true because it works. Has done and always will do. In his book, Euclid says this is ‘self-evident.’ You see there it is even in that 2,000-year-old book of mechanical law. It is a self-evident truth that things that are equal to the same thing are equal to each other.” Lincoln determines not to invite the delegation to Washington, strengthening his hand in the House in the bid to push through the Thirteenth Amendment.

The general level of the film’s acting is extraordinary. Beyond Day-Lewis of special note are Jones as radical Republican leader Congressman Thaddeus Stevens of Pennsylvania and Field’s sympathetic portrayal of the mercurial Mary Todd Lincoln. A subplot follows the tragedy and drama within the Lincoln family—a son, Willie, had died in the White House of typhus and Mary desperately feared losing a second, Robert (Joseph Gordon-Levitt), who demanded his father allow him to enlist in the Union army.

Jones’ Stevens provides another thread to the story. Vilified for a century in American history textbooks as a monster, Stevens emerges in the film as the most uncompromising advocate of equality—though he himself compromises in order to see the Thirteenth Amendment pass.

The primary plotline, as noted, involves Lincoln’s determination to see through the abolition amendment in the midst of a leftover Congress—a task that would depend upon winning the votes of a number of Democratic Party Congressmen who have opposed emancipation. To its credit, Spielberg’s *Lincoln* does not shy away from the complexity of the situation.

In an early scene, Lincoln explains to his skeptical cabinet the necessity for the amendment in spite of the Emancipation Proclamation, which had gone into effect January 1, 1863. That measure had been based on the assertion of his wartime powers as commander-in-chief. Lincoln feared it might be reversed in peacetime by the courts, and he also feared that if the new measure were not implemented peace might be made with the South allowing slavery to continue.

Lincoln is weaker in its presentation of the process by which this amendment was passed. It focuses on the activities of three “hustler” lobbyists played by James Spader, John Hawkes and Tim Blake Nelson—a trio clearly set down in the movie for comic relief—as they attempt to cajole and bribe wavering Democrats into supporting the amendment. This process was real—Lincoln preferred to think of it as politicking rather than bribery—but the film tends to minimize the more powerful political trends at play.

The Democrats had been defeated in the 1864 elections by a wave of popular support in the North for Lincoln, the Republicans and, indeed, emancipation. The Democratic Party had made Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation *the* issue in the 1864 elections, launching vicious race-baiting attacks on the “Black Republican” Party in the North.

Had it not been for a turn of fortunes in the late summer of 1864, and chiefly General William Tecumseh Sherman’s capture of Atlanta, Lincoln and the Republicans might very well have lost the election of 1864 to the Democrats and George McClellan, the former commander of the Union Army of the Potomac. The Democrats, had they won, were prepared to negotiate a peace with the Confederacy that would have recognized its independence and reversed emancipation.

As it turned out, the electorate delivered a crushing blow to the Democrats. The population was moving to the left, attested to by the fact that the Army voted more than 80 percent for Lincoln over McClellan. All of this finds only a faint echo in *Lincoln*—we see soldiers eagerly awaiting word of the vote on the Thirteenth Amendment as it flashes across the telegraph, we hear repeated references to defeated Democrats, we sense the gravity and momentousness of the final vote on the amendment, and the film has Lincoln, in the beginning, asserting his belief that his Emancipation Proclamation and his use of war powers had been rooted in the popular will, which he found to have been vindicated by the elections of 1864.

Yet the role of the masses in history is minimized; the conception of politics as horse-trading is privileged. This likely reflects the influence of establishment writer Kearns Goodwin, whose emphasis in *Team of Rivals* is on Lincoln’s cunning as a politician. Whatever the merits of the book, hers is an approach that reflects the complacency and narrowness of politics in contemporary America, characteristics that cloud the understanding of what was a very different time.

It does not detract from the film in the least to point out that Kushner and Spielberg might have focused on several other moments in the long and bloody war. There were several turning points full with drama, including the aforementioned election of 1864, the defeat of the invading Southern armies at the Battle of Gettysburg in Pennsylvania in 1863, and perhaps most importantly of all, the summer and fall of 1862 after Lincoln had drafted the Emancipation Proclamation and awaited some sort of battlefield success so that it could be issued, which ultimately came with the Battle of Antietam on September 17, Constitution Day, that year.

That there will be considerable interest in *Lincoln* appears likely. It is significant that the film appears *when it does*, at a time of social crisis and impending upheaval; *how it does*, from a leading Hollywood filmmaker, Steven Spielberg; and *as it does*—not as an attack on Lincoln, the abolitionists or the Civil War itself.

Lincoln has been pilloried by numerous practitioners of “identity politics” as a racist and hypocrite. And it has become nearly an article of faith in certain layers of academia, the erstwhile civil rights movement and the ex-left that the Civil War accomplished nothing, that what followed in the African American experience was simply “slavery by another name,” to borrow the title from a recent documentary.

As the passage from Marx indicates, socialists view the Civil War and Lincoln’s role in quite a different fashion, as part of an objective historical assessment, paying full tribute to the revolutionary and world-historical character of the titanic struggle of the 1860s.

All the evidence suggests considerable popular interest in *Lincoln*, with one publication describing its limited opening weekend as “triumphant.” It is to be hoped that the film will lead to a further engagement with Lincoln the historical figure, with the abolitionists and the Civil War, as well as a deeper appreciation of the motor force of American history: the struggle for equality.