

# Understanding Lincoln: An interview with historian Allen Guelzo

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*Allen Guelzo is the Henry R. Luce III Professor of the Civil War Era at Gettysburg College, where he serves as director of the Civil War Era Studies Program. He is the author of numerous books, including Abraham Lincoln: Redeemer President and Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation: The End of Slavery in America and Fateful Lightning: A New History of the Civil War and Reconstruction.*

Guelzo spoke with Tom Mackaman of the World Socialist Web Site in his office at Gettysburg College on a Saturday morning in March. A large academic conference was being held that weekend at the college entitled "The Future of Civil War History." Gettysburg, in southeastern Pennsylvania, was the location of the bloodiest battle in the Civil War, and the city's college is now one of the leading centers in the study of the Civil War and Abraham Lincoln.

*During the period addressed in this interview, the late antebellum and the Civil War, American capitalism and its political representatives, led by Lincoln, played a revolutionary role, confronting the reactionary leadership of the American South and its system of slave labor. Within a decade of the end of the Civil War the class struggle between the triumphant capitalist order and the working class had supplanted the earlier struggle between "free labor" and slavery as the decisive issue in American history.*

Tom Mackaman: How did you come about your interest in Lincoln and the Civil War?

Allen Guelzo: I suppose the interest in Lincoln and the Civil War really is a long-term one that grows out of a certain boyhood interest and fascination with the man. But I didn't really get deeply involved in Lincoln Studies until the mid-1990s. Because my PhD had been in the history of American philosophy, I was writing a book on the idea of freedom of the will and determinism in American thought. I knew that Lincoln had had some things to say on the subject, so I looked them up, ended up writing a paper about them, got invited to read it at the Abraham Lincoln Association meeting, and once my hand was in the Lincoln cookie jar I couldn't get it out. A publisher approached me about writing a book on Lincoln. One thing led to another and, well, here I am.

TM: Which was the first book?

AG: *Abraham Lincoln: Redeemer President*, with a title borrowed shamelessly from Walt Whitman.

TM: You have been at work on Lincoln, the Civil War, and the emancipation of the slaves for a number of years now. How have your thoughts on these subjects evolved?

AG: Well, I don't know actually that they have changed all that much. In general the outline that I have had in my mind of Lincoln as a character and a thinker has been pretty stable. And it really grows out of a moment in Charles Sellers' book *The Market Revolution* in 1991, when, in describing the role of lawyers as the "shock troops of capitalism", it struck me how very much Lincoln looked exactly like what Sellers was describing. That was reinforced when I read John Ashworth's first volume on the capitalist transformation of America, and once again this description of the role of lawyers just seemed so remarkably close to

Lincoln that it made me pursue this notion of Lincoln as your archetypal Whig, bourgeois, middle class cultural figure. And that in large measure is what I've been working from ever since.

TM: Could you explain what you mean by that a little bit more?

AG: Lincoln is, both culturally and in terms of his economic thinking, firmly and immovably located in the center of what we can call liberal democratic thought in the 19th century. He is very much market oriented, with tremendous confidence in the power of a capitalist society to transform for the better, and he believes in opening the possibilities of that society to as many as possible. To him, that's what's coterminous with liberty. If you have to put him in company, he would belong with John Stuart Mill, whom he seriously admired. Shortly before he was assassinated, Lincoln was asked by a journalist what books had been most influential for him. One of the two books he indicated is Stuart Mill's *On Liberty*. Put him in that context of the upwardly aspiring bourgeoisie—that's Lincoln.

Lincoln is someone who has fled from romantic agrarianism, the kind of agricultural subsistence economy that his father was a participant in and a good example of. Lincoln regarded that world with distaste and left it as soon as he turned 21. He never looks back, and moves at once into the world of the cash economy, cash wages, investment, and business, and that's where he lives for the rest of his life. He fails twice actually at being *in* business, but undeterred by that he shifts over to becoming a lawyer, and that's when he becomes part of the "shock troops of capitalism" that Sellers talks about.

TM: In his law practice he did extensive business with railroad concerns, did he not?

AG: That was his single most lucrative client. Lincoln's law practice is a very extensive one, and it runs all the way from big railroad cases down to \$2.50 trespass cases. But what is remarkable about his law practice is that it's overwhelmingly a civil practice—only about 15 percent of his overall cases were criminal cases. And the preponderance of that civil practice was debt collection. He was, so to speak, a repo man. He was either collecting or enforcing collection. And he was a big friend of the railroads. He even served briefly as a lobbyist. If you'd asked anybody in central Illinois in the late 1850s who Abraham Lincoln was, they probably would have said, "Oh, that railroad lawyer."

One aspect of that railroad practice stands out: in 1856, Lincoln wrote a very extensive memorandum about evicting squatters from railroad land. That was a hot-button issue, because the lands that the Illinois Central was constructed upon were originally federally owned public lands, and many of them had been squatted upon over the years by people who were firmly convinced that they possessed preemption rights. In other words, they believed they had the right of first refusal if the land was ever to be disposed of by the government. Lincoln's memorandum pulls out all the legal floorboards from under them and authorizes the Illinois Central Railroad to proceed to eviction without any restraint.

TM: Lincoln was an attorney for the railroads. But in other contexts, in certain quotes, did he not privilege labor?

AG: He does indeed talk about labor having priority over capital, which many people mistake as a statement of the labor theory of value. But he's actually not talking about *any* labor theory there. What he's doing is objecting to a labor relationship that said that capital has to give orders to labor, that laborers are so ignorant and so stupid—and of course what he's primarily talking about here are slave laborers—that the only way any kind of productive work will happen is if capital—meaning slave owners—gives them direction. That he objected to, because that impugned the agency of the self-motivated laborer in a capitalist economy. But it's the agency of the laborer, not any imputation to the value of the laborers' product, that Lincoln is describing.

He's actually responding to James Henry Hammond's famous "Mudsill" speech of 1858 which Lincoln thought was profoundly offensive for re-introducing the notion of status: *status* meaning that certain people were born a certain way, and they were always going to be that way, so the only way you'll make them work is if you flog them. That was what Lincoln was objecting to.

TM: What do you make of the concept of the "free labor ideology," a concept that is associated with the work of the historian Eric Foner?

AG: Foner wrote the book—*Free Labor, Free Soil, Free Men*—in 1970, based on his doctoral dissertation under Richard Hofstadter. And it's a very, very, good book. In fact it's hard to put a finger on a book that better explicates the free labor ideology of the Republicans—and of Lincoln in the bargain. Some close seconds to that are Heather Richardson's *The Greatest Nation of the Earth*, which is not specifically about Lincoln but is about the broader free labor/free wage commitments of the Republicans, and a very good chapter on Lincoln in Daniel Walker Howe's *Political Culture of the American Whigs*.

TM: Could you explain the way Lincoln's career as an attorney in this period influenced his thinking on slavery?

AG: To Lincoln, slavery undercut the free labor outlook on the world because it denied advancement and self-improvement. For Lincoln, the great attraction of any economic regime was the degree to which it permitted accumulation and self-promotion. He once described the ideal system as being one where the penniless beginner starts out working for somebody else, accumulates capital on his own by dint of savings, goes into business for himself, and then eventually becomes so successful that he hires others, who in turn continue the cycle. And he spoke of that as being the order of things in a society of equals. For him, the very notion of equality is a matter of equality of openness, aspiration, and opportunity.

This is what he says in 1859 at the Wisconsin State Agricultural Fair (and bear in mind that he is saying this only a year after one of the most severe financial depressions in the 19th century):

Some of you will be successful, and such will need but little philosophy to take them home in cheerful spirits; others will be disappointed, and will be in a less happy mood. To such, let it be said, "Lay it not too much to heart." Let them adopt the maxim, "Better luck next time"; and then, by renewed exertion, make that better luck for themselves.

The only reason people do not succeed in a capitalist environment is because they are improvident, they are lazy, they are good for nothing, or they experience some incredible turn of bad luck—that's why "better luck next time."

That may seem like vanishingly small consolation to people who've just come through a depression, but for Lincoln, that kind of hardship paled beside slavery. Slavery says that there is a category of people that can never be allowed to rise, that cannot improve themselves no matter how hard they try because they will always be slaves. It's very much the classic disjuncture between the Enlightenment and feudalism. Feudalism talks about people being born with *status*, and everyone comes into this world equipped with a *status*. This status is either free or slave, serf or nobility, elect or damned, whatever. For the Enlightenment people come into this world armed with *rights*, and the ideal political system is the

system that allows them to realize those rights, to use those rights in the freest and most natural fashion possible.

TM: Is this what you have in mind when you refer to Lincoln as the last Enlightenment figure in American history?

AG: Exactly. This is why I call him our last Enlightenment politician. Or at least the last one who is securely and virtually exclusively located within that mentality.

TM: Lincoln once said that he did not have a political thought that did not flow—

AG: From the Declaration of Independence ...

TM: ... Could you talk about the relationship between Lincoln and the American Revolution, and Jefferson and the Declaration of Independence in particular?

AG: He loves—and he's not exaggerating—the Declaration of Independence. When he talks at Gettysburg about the country being founded on a proposition, that's what he means, and specifically that *all men are created equal*. What does he mean by *equal* though? He means equality of aspiration. He spoke those words about never having had a political thought which did not flow from the Declaration in February of 1861, outside Independence Hall. He believed that what the Founders meant, what the Declaration of Independence meant, was that everybody in the race of life ought to get a fair start and a fair chance. That was the star by which he navigated, and the best example he could offer to anybody was his own life.

TM: The rail splitter.

AG: Sure. Here's someone who had come up from grinding backwoods poverty and by dint of his own effort, intelligence, and gifts, had risen to more than a modicum of success. Not only success in financial terms but success socially. In every respect he was his own confirmation of his theories. Anyone who impugned free labor and the free labor ideology was really attacking him personally.

TM: Considering further Lincoln's own intellectual formation, much has been made of his facility with Shakespeare and the Old Testament. What other influences were there? Did he read Melville, did he read Hawthorne?

AG: Not likely. He had no taste for fiction. He said once that he tried to start *Ivanhoe* but only got halfway through it—which may replicate the experience of many undergraduates and high school students today. But that in itself is something of a statement. He read precious little fiction. He loved poetry, though. But it was, significantly, not romantic poetry that he cottoned up to. He did like Byron, but the poets he admired the most were very much poets of the Enlightenment. He loved Pope and quoted him often from memory. He loved Burns, who is a transitional figure between the Enlightenment and romanticism.

In terms of other things that he reads, he reads political economy. He read most of the major treatises that flowed downstream from Adam Smith. He's read McCulloch, Henry Carey, and Francis Wayland. One observer said that on political economy he was great, that there was no one better than Lincoln.

He also had some scientific interest in geology. John Hay, his secretary, was surprised to discover he had some interest in philology and the origins of language. He never explains why he is interested in those, but he would always surprise people by what he knew. One Canadian journalist who visited him in 1864 was taken aback when Lincoln launched into a long "dissertation" on comparative points of British and American law.

That's particularly surprising because in another context Lincoln professed to know nothing about international law. But Lincoln habitually would tell people he was totally ignorant of a subject which in fact he was quite well versed in, because then they would underestimate him, and when they underestimated him they would fall into his trap. Leonard Swett once said that anybody who mistook Lincoln for a simple man would soon end up with his back in a ditch.

TM: The film *Lincoln* depicts this moment in which Lincoln makes a major decision by discussing Euclid's principles of mathematics. Is there some basis to this in fact?

AG: Yes, he did read Euclid. It appealed to what one of his law partners referred to as Lincoln's passion for "mathematical exactness." Lincoln was not eloquent in the usual 19th century way, certainly not in the romantic way. He was not a man of frothing at the mouth or shaking his fist in a dramatic way. Lincoln was logic, and when he got the hook in your mouth he would pull you in no matter how much line was involved. One observer of the Lincoln-Douglas debates said that if you listened to Lincoln and Douglas for five minutes, you would go with Douglas. If you listened to them for an hour you always went with Lincoln.

I thought the film was 90 percent on the mark, which given the way Hollywood usually does history is saying something. I thought that it got with reasonable accuracy a lot of Lincoln's character, the characters of the main protagonists, and the overall debate over the 13th Amendment. The acting and screenwriting were especially well done. I remember thinking afterwards that all the time I'd been watching the movie I had never thought that Daniel Day-Lewis was *acting*, because what he portrayed seemed so close to my own mental image of what Lincoln must have been like.

TM: Lincoln remains such a popular figure. What explains his hold on our fascination and our affection? If we were to consider him only as an attorney for the railroads, as a bourgeois politician, perhaps this would be difficult to explain?

AG: For several reasons. First, as a leader, he is a combination of the virtues of democratic leadership—as opposed to, say, aristocratic leadership, which honors valor, physical prowess, and dominance. Democratic leadership is more about perseverance, self-limitation, and humility. What we see in Lincoln is a collection of the virtues we think are most important in a democratic leadership.

Secondly, he really did preside successfully over this incredibly critical moment we call the Civil War. He *did* keep the union together, he *did* defeat the Confederacy. Anyone who sits down for a moment to think about what the alternative would have looked like—a successful breakaway Confederacy—and how that would have flowed downstream has to be impressed with what Lincoln was able to save us from. There is in the end no intrinsic reason why the Southern Confederacy should not have achieved its independence. And if they had, that would have had serious implications for the later role the North American continent plays in world affairs. Imagine a North American continent as divided politically and economically as South America. This would take the United States off the table as a major world player, and then what would you do with the history of the 20th century?

But I think Lincoln is also important in a third way—and this may be of interest to your readers. I come back to the old Werner Sombart question—"Why there is no socialism in America?" There have been any number of answers. I wonder out loud whether one reason there is no socialism in America is because of Lincoln.

In the American context Lincoln imparted to liberal democracy a sense of nobility and purpose that it has not always had in other contexts. He makes democracy something transcendent, and especially at Gettysburg where he talks about the nation having this new birth of freedom. He ratchets the horizons of liberal democracy right up past the spires of Cologne Cathedral and he makes it this glowing attractive ideal that people are willing to make these tremendous sacrifices to protect. Because at the end of the day this is what the Civil War is about—it's about the preservation of liberal democracy. In the 1860s the United States was the last Enlightenment experiment that was still standing. What you had in the climate of mid-19th century Europe was the renaissance of romantic aristocracy ...

TM: He refers to this in the Gettysburg Address...

AG: Yes, that's really what he's talking about. This war is a test whether this nation or any other nation so conceived can long endure. Is democracy self-destructive? Are the aristocrats right? That the only way you'll ever have order in society is to let them run things? That you cannot put rule into the hands of ordinary people because they'll botch it from selfishness, egotism, and stupidity? The Civil War becomes this demonstrator model for aristocrats to say, "See what happens when you let ordinary people govern." The romantic contempt of the American experiment, whether that contempt comes from a Heinrich Heine, from an Otto Von Bismarck...

TM: Or from the Southern elite...

AG: Exactly. This is what Lincoln saw in the Southern elite—a defection from Enlightenment bourgeois politics toward aristocratic rule. And I think there's really some substance there. Because if you look at someone like Bismarck, for instance, the Prussian Junkers are not great aristocrats. They are the squirearchy. They are very similar in complexion and structure to the plantation aristocracy of the Old South. No surprise then that Bismarck sees in the Confederacy something that he admires, that he applauds. Lincoln saw himself arrayed against that.

Lincoln sees American democracy as a last stand, what he calls the last, best hope. And if this goes down, we may so discredit the whole notion of democracy that no one will ever want to go this way again, and so this is the test. It's a test of whether or not we'll have this new birth of freedom, if we'll finally shuck off these last husks of aristocracy and move forward in the direction of democracy. That for him is the vital issue.

People today often want to separate slavery, and say that Lincoln was interested in preserving the union and not in destroying slavery. No, that gets it exactly wrong. The two are as knotted together as a rope, because the only union worth preserving is a union that has abjured slavery. So for Lincoln to get rid of slavery is to purge America of the aristocratic poison. He once said that slavery was the one retrograde institution that was poisoning the American republic, keeping the American republic from realizing its full potential.

TM: What do you make of the criticism of Lincoln the historical figure from the standpoint of identity politics, or, more recently, similar criticism over *Lincoln* the film?

AG: There has been a current that wants to reject the image of Lincoln as the Emancipator by questioning whether or not he emancipated the slaves. It has had some long innings. Some of it goes back to Marx's comment on the Gotha Program, that the proletariat has to emancipate itself, that it cannot look to some other agency to do so. That image of self-emancipation certainly has a role to play in W.E.B. Du Bois' *Black Reconstruction* in 1930, because Du Bois will say we can't really talk about emancipation unless it's self-emancipation. Du Bois is picturing race as the replacement for class. And this gets popularized in the writing of people like Vincent Harding, Lerone Bennett, Barbara Field, and any number of people writing today—some of whom have probably never read Du Bois, much less Marx.

Lincoln does drop comments that can be taken out of their historical context. For instance the most widely cited statement about race is the one he makes at the fourth debate at Charleston, Illinois. He says:

I am not, nor ever have been in favor of bringing about in any way the social and political equality of the white and black races,—that I am not nor ever have been in favor of making voters or jurors of negroes, nor of qualifying them to hold office, nor to intermarry with white people; and I will say in addition to this that there is a physical difference between the white and black races which I believe will for ever forbid the two races living together.

People like Bennett focus on this and say, Lincoln was really just another garden variety racist. What they do not see is what Lincoln follows that comment with. He says:

there is no reason in the world why the negro is not entitled to all the

rights enumerated in the Declaration of Independence—the right of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. I hold that he is as much entitled to these as the white man.... he is not my equal in many respects, certainly not in color—perhaps not in intellectual and moral endowments; but in the right to eat the bread without leave of anybody else which his own hand earns, he is my equal and the equal of Judge Douglas, and the equal of every other man....

That must have made every white supremacist in the crowd gasp.

I think, on the whole, given that the environment of the US in the middle of the 19th century is so white supremacist in its assumptions, Lincoln is actually quite remarkable for standing apart from that. But the decontextualized quote provides fodder for people to say that Lincoln was really not on our side.

This is aided and abetted by Richard Hofstadter's famous essay in *The American Political Tradition* in which he refers to the Emancipation Proclamation as having "all the moral grandeur of a bill of lading." What Hofstadter meant is that here is the man capable of writing the Gettysburg Address and the Second Inaugural, but when it comes to the Emancipation Proclamation it's as flat as a pancake. Why? Hofstadter's conclusion is that Lincoln was just insincere about it. And even Marx noted that the language in the Emancipation Proclamation was dull. He compared it to a summons sent by one county lawyer to another. Again, they quote Marx out of context, because then he goes on to say something very laudatory.

Put these together and you have people saying Lincoln wasn't the Great Emancipator and he wasn't sincere, and so on and so forth. I think that this is thoroughly, absurdly, off-base. It's off-base because of the historical process. They really don't understand the rules of the ground game in 1861 and 1862. One black power activist in the 1960s wrote, "Why didn't Lincoln free the slaves altogether? Why didn't he just wake up one morning and say, I'm going to free all the slaves?" Well, he's not the Czar of all the Russians. He's the president of the United States, and legally he's allowed to do certain things, and that's not one of them. He has to work within the process.

TM: Concretely, for example, there's the argument that Lincoln didn't free the slaves, that the slaves freed themselves in the Civil War.

AG: That's to misuse the word freedom. Slaves free themselves by running away, but they free themselves *de facto*, but not *de jure*. A slave that runs away is still a runaway, just like a convict who escapes from prison is not free; he's an escapee, and can be picked up and arrested and incarcerated. In the Civil War you have many runaways, but there has to be something more than that. You have to have the application of *law*. That is what Lincoln provides in the Emancipation Proclamation. It is the legal statement of the freedom of about 3 million slaves.

TM: It's also the case that the large number of runaways in the Civil War was made possible by the presence of the Union Army in the South ...

AG: Which is also acting as an instrument of Lincoln's policy. So ask the slaves themselves how they were freed, and they will say, "Lincoln's proclamation." The testimony of freed people before the joint committee on reconstruction—about how they became free is uniform. They were well aware that the Fugitive Slave Laws and Constitutional provisions for the rendition of slaves were still in force. The position of runaways remained perilous. The Emancipation Proclamation resolved that.

One other way to look at this is to say, "What if George McClellan had won the presidency in 1864, defeating Lincoln?" He would have immediately begun negotiations with the Confederacy. And it is difficult for me to imagine that those negotiations would have not involved some sort of provision for rendition. After all, the treaty ending the Revolutionary War with Great Britain and the treaty ending the War of 1812 with Great Britain both involved the rendition of runaway slaves. Absent the Emancipation Proclamation, that could have happened again.

TM: There's a conjoined argument, and that is that the Civil War really didn't accomplish anything at all in light of the implementation of Jim

Crow...

AG: That's rubbish.

TM: To bring us up to the present, I was somewhat surprised that there was not more commemoration, more celebration, of the anniversary of the 150th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation...

AG: I was surprised too.

TM: What do you make of that?

AG: Part of this goes back to the reputation the Emancipation Proclamation has had attached to it by people like Hofstadter. That line—that it had no more "moral grandeur than a bill of lading"—I encounter at so many levels and in so many places. And, yes, the Proclamation does lack the rhetorical force of the Gettysburg Address. But it is a legal document; it's got work to do.

And yet I will say this. Just yesterday, I heard a gentleman from the Henry Ford Museum who said that 200,000 people came to see a copy of the Emancipation Proclamation borrowed from the National Archives. I think we underestimate the power that the Proclamation in fact still has.

On the other hand, we made an overture to the White House, trying to solicit their interest for something on January 1, the 150th anniversary. They blew us off. They just weren't interested. They were in reelection mode and that trumped any interest in Lincoln and the Proclamation. I thought that was really, really, weird. You would think that the first African American president would leap at the opportunity. But no. Absolutely nothing.

TM: I wonder if it doesn't have to do with the symbolic appeal to equality that the Emancipation Proclamation makes in the context of mounting social distress and deepening economic crisis. How do you explain it?

AG: I really don't know. Maybe part of it is identity politics. Maybe they're just thinking about practical, nuts and bolts things and uninterested in history. I mean, the guy *is* from Chicago. Somehow the idea of a celebration for the Emancipation Proclamation just got nixed.



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