

# Racial-communalist politics and the second assassination of Abraham Lincoln

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One month after the killing of George Floyd, the mass multi-racial demonstrations against police violence are in danger of being hijacked and misdirected by reactionary political forces who are attempting to promote racial divisions, sabotage the unity of working people and youth, and undermine the development of the class struggle against capitalism. This campaign is now concentrated on desecrating and destroying the statues of figures who led the American Revolution and the Civil War.

It is difficult to find words that adequately express the sense of revulsion produced by the monstrous attacks on memorials that honor the memory of Abraham Lincoln, the United States' greatest president, who led the country during the Second American Revolution that destroyed the Slave Power and emancipated millions of enslaved African Americans.

On the evening of April 14, 1865, less than a week after the surrender of the main Confederate army, which brought the four-year Civil War to an end, Lincoln was shot in the head by the pro-slavery actor John Wilkes Booth. Nine hours later, at 7:22 on the morning of April 15, Lincoln died of the wound inflicted by the assassin. Standing beside Lincoln's death bed, Secretary of War Edwin Stanton famously declared: "Now he belongs to the ages."

Lincoln's martyrdom produced an outpouring of grief throughout the United States and the world. The working class recognized that it had lost a great champion of democracy and human equality. Karl Marx, writing on behalf of the International Working Men's Association, wrote in the days after Lincoln's assassination that he was "one of the rare men who succeed in becoming great, without ceasing to be good."

Abraham Lincoln was an extraordinarily complex man, whose life and politics reflected the contradictions of his time. He could not, as he once stated, "escape history." Determined to save the Union, he was driven by the logic of the bloody civil war to resort to revolutionary measures. In the course of the brutal struggle, Lincoln gave expression to the revolutionary-democratic aspirations that inspired hundreds of thousands of Americans to fight and sacrifice their lives for a "new birth of freedom."

Every period of political upsurge in the United States has drawn inspiration from Lincoln's life. Since its opening in 1922, the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC has been the site of some of the most important moments in the struggle against racial oppression and for equality. In 1939, when Hitler's Nazis were on the march in Europe and fascism had many sympathizers among the American ruling elite, the famous African American contralto

Marian Anderson was denied the right to sing at Constitution Hall. So instead she sang on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial before a crowd of 75,000.

In 1963, at the March on Washington, Martin Luther King, Jr. stood at the same location as he delivered his "I Have a Dream" speech, calling for equality and racial integration before a crowd of 250,000. Later in that decade, tens of thousands of youth protesting the Vietnam War assembled at the monument.

It is not coincidental that the working-class upsurge of the 1930s was associated with many great artistic depictions of Lincoln, including the films *Young Mr. Lincoln* (1939) and *Abe Lincoln in Illinois* (1940). Aaron Copland's beloved orchestral-narrative masterpiece, *Lincoln Portrait* (1942), concludes with the declaration that the sixteenth president of the United States "is ever-lasting in the memory of his countrymen."

But now, 155 years after the tragedy at Ford's Theater, Lincoln is the subject of a second assassination. This one must not succeed.

Eleanor Holmes Norton, Washington DC's nonvoting delegate to Congress, said she will introduce a bill to remove the famous Emancipation Monument from the Lincoln Park in Washington, DC. The race-fixated protesters have declared their intention to tear down the monument, which was paid for by former slaves and movingly dedicated by black abolitionist Frederick Douglass in 1876.

"The designers of the Emancipation Statue in Lincoln Park in DC didn't take into account the views of African Americans," Norton stated in a Tweet. Democrats assert that the statue demeans "the black community" because it depicts Lincoln freeing a slave crouched in a runner's pose, which the sculptor intended to symbolize the liberation of the Civil War.

Norton's reactionary effort is being supported by Democratic Party officials in Boston, who will hold hearings in the coming weeks to entertain demands for the removal of a replica of the Emancipation Memorial in that city.

Lincoln is not the only leader of the anti-Confederate forces to be targeted. In San Francisco last week, a statue of Ulysses S. Grant, the great general of the victorious Union army and later president of the United States, was torn down.

An even filthier example of the racist campaign is the desecration of the Boston monument honoring the legendary 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry Regiment. The 54th Massachusetts, led by abolitionist Robert Gould Shaw, was the second all-black regiment organized in the Civil War. Protesters

object to the fact that the 54th, famously depicted in the film *Glory* (1989), was commanded by a white officer, Shaw. Holland Cotter, the *New York Times*' co-chief art critic, slandered the monument as a "white supremacist" visual for its depiction of Shaw leading his African American battalion.

Another Union monument, a statue of abolitionist Hans Christian Heg (1829–1863), was pulled down Tuesday night in Madison, Wisconsin. The statue was beheaded before being thrown into a nearby lake.

A Norwegian immigrant, Heg led the 15th Wisconsin regiment, known as the Scandinavian Regiment, against the Confederacy. Prior to the war, Heg, a member of the Free Soil Party, fiercely opposed slavery and headed an anti-slave catcher militia in Wisconsin. He was killed at the age of 33 at the Battle of Chickamauga in September 1863.

The Socialist Equality Party rejects all the lame liberal excuses and justifications that are offered to legitimize the desecration of these memorials. Actions, whatever the motivations ascribed to them, have objective significance and very real political consequences.

The assault on Lincoln monuments and other memorials honoring the leaders of the American Revolution and Civil War are political provocations aimed at whipping up racial animosities. Such provocations are well-known forms of communalist politics, which resemble the burning down of Muslim mosques by Hindu fanatics or Hindu temples by Muslim fanatics. Here in the United States, the statues are being attacked as examples of "white" rule.

The attacks on the statues are the outcome of a campaign by the two capitalist parties and various reactionary elements in the upper-middle class to racialize and communalize American politics. The growing intensity of this campaign is a response to the upsurge of working-class militancy, which is seen as a threat to capitalism. Far from welcoming the interracial unity displayed in the demonstrations against police brutality, the ruling elites and most affluent sections of the middle class are terrified by its political implications.

In the promotion of racial politics, there is a division of labor between the Democratic and Republican parties. Trump and the Republicans pitch their appeal to the most politically disoriented elements in American society, manipulating their economic insecurities in a manner intended to incite racial antagonism and deflect social anger away from the capitalist system.

The Democratic Party employs another variant of communalist politics, evaluating and explaining all social problems and conflicts in racial terms. Whatever the particular issue may be—poverty, police brutality, unemployment, low wages, deaths caused by the pandemic—it is almost exclusively defined in racial terms. In this racialized fantasy world, "whites" are endowed with an innate "privilege" that exempts them from all hardship.

This grotesque distortion of present-day reality requires a no less grotesque distortion of the past. For contemporary America to be portrayed as a land of relentless racial warfare, it is necessary to create a historical narrative in the same terms. In place of the class struggle, the entire history of the United States is presented as the story of perpetual racial conflict.

Even before the outbreak of the pandemic, efforts to create racial

foundations for contemporary communalist politics were well underway. The *New York Times*, the principal voice of corporate and financial patrons of the Democratic Party, concocted the insidious 1619 Project, the central purpose of which was to promote a racial narrative. The main argument of this project, which was unveiled in August 2019, was that the American Revolution was undertaken to protect North American slavery and that the Civil War, led by the racist Abraham Lincoln, had nothing to do with the ending of slavery. The slaves, so the new story went, liberated themselves.

The purpose of lies about history, as Trotsky explained, is to conceal real social contradictions. In this case, the contradictions are those embedded in the staggering levels of social inequality produced by capitalism. These contradictions can be resolved on a progressive basis only through the methods of class struggle, in which the working class fights consciously to put an end to capitalism and replaces it with socialism. Efforts to divert and sabotage that struggle by dissolving class identity into the miasma of racial identity lead inexorably in the direction of fascism.

Through the promotion of a racial version of communalism, all factions of the ruling class seek to divide the working class so as to better exploit it and ward off the threat of revolution. It is no coincidence that when American society is straining under the weight of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has killed more than 120,000 people and sparked an economic crisis on the scale of the Great Depression, the Democrats are ever-more ferociously seeking to make race the fundamental issue.

The alternative to the politics of racial communalism is the socialist politics of working-class unity. This is the program of the Socialist Equality Party, and those who agree with this perspective should join our party.



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