

Illinois Democrats race bait Abraham Lincoln—again

Chicago mayor targets monuments to Civil War, American Revolution

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As tragedies go, few match the poetic dimensions of the assassination of Abraham Lincoln by John Wilkes Booth on April 14, Good Friday, 1865. Coming just five days after General Robert E. Lee surrendered Confederate armies to Ulysses S. Grant at Appomattox, and four years and three days after the attack on Fort Sumter opened the conflict, Lincoln's killing was, symbolically, the last act in the carnage of the Civil War that had taken the lives of some 700,000 Americans, made 4 million slaves "henceforth and forever free," and secured for the United States "a new birth of freedom."

Walt Whitman captured in verse the mood of grief at the moment of triumph in his poem "O Captain! My Captain!," which begins,

*O Captain! My Captain! our fearful trip is done;
The ship has weather' d every rack, the prize we sought is won;
The port is near, the bells I hear, the people all exulting,
While follow eyes the steady keel, the vessel grim and daring:
But O heart! heart! heart!
O the bleeding drops of red,
Where on the deck my Captain lies,
Fallen cold and dead.*

More than 7 million people—over one-third of the population of the northern states—observed Lincoln's funeral train along its 1,654-mile rail journey from Washington D.C. to Springfield, Illinois. Men, women and children—people who knew firsthand the suffering and loss of America's bloodiest war—lined the track, often waiting for hours in the elements. "He was crucified for us!" an elderly African American was quoted as saying at the train's passing in York, Pennsylvania, during a steady rain. The old man was right. Booth, the assassin, was a white supremacist who murdered Lincoln in vengeance for the freeing of the slaves.

The train retraced backward the route Lincoln had taken in February 1861, when he left Illinois for his March 4 inauguration in Washington D.C. Seven of the 13 southern states that would form the Confederacy had by then already seceded to form a slave republic, and the US stood on the brink of war. Lincoln had been forced to disguise himself to pass through Maryland lest he fall into the hands of pro-slavery mobs. But in the return through Baltimore, thousands paid their respects. "The world only discovered him a hero after he had fallen a martyr," Marx observed.

Chicago was the funeral train's last stop before Lincoln's entombment at Springfield. The *Chicago Tribune* estimated that four-fifths of the city's population turned out, among them "native and foreign born, white and black, old and young, male and female." The *New York Times* thought that so many had come to Chicago from "neighboring cities and towns,

swelling the masses which everywhere throng the streets" including "large delegations from Waukegan, Kenosha, Milwaukee and other towns in Wisconsin," that there must have been 250,000 present that day to say goodbye. But Lincoln had already bid farewell to his home state four years earlier when, on February 11, 1861, he had departed Springfield:

My friends, no one, not in my situation, can appreciate my feeling of sadness at this parting. To this place, and the kindness of these people, I owe everything. Here I have lived a quarter of a century, and have passed from a young to an old man. Here my children have been born, and one is buried. I now leave, not knowing when, or whether ever, I may return, with a task before me greater than that which rested upon Washington.

Killed at the moment of victory and at the height of his popularity—and before the brutal capitalism of the Gilded Age laid its grip on the American republic—it is little wonder that Lincoln has been, alongside Washington, the most memorialized president. It is less surprising that Chicago, on "behalf of Illinois' noblest son ... surpassed all others in the proofs of her devotion in death as in life," as the *Tribune* put it.

It is true that much of the official mythologizing long sought to turn Lincoln into a harmless icon of capitalist self-improvement. Curiously, those most taken in by this legend have always been America's cynical and embittered middle-class radicals. But such efforts have never gained much ground in breaking Lincoln's hold on the sentiments of the working class, nor in washing away the memory of his leadership of America's second revolution. This has been nowhere truer than in Chicago, and especially among generations of black workers. In February 1913, a half century after the Emancipation Proclamation, some 135,000 African Americans turned out in Chicago on Lincoln's birthday.

But now Chicago's Democratic mayor, Lori Lightfoot, is aiming to remove five statues of the Great Emancipator. She has appointed a committee tasked with the "review" of 41 public monuments and works of art, culled from a list of hundreds in the city. Among them are those to Lincoln, as well as monuments to founding fathers George Washington and Benjamin Franklin, and to Grant, who rose in the course of the Civil War from a tannery in Galena, Illinois, to the command of all Union armies.

Chicago's Monuments Project Committee was announced in August of 2020 following the nationwide protests in response to the police murder of George Floyd. It was part and parcel of a concerted effort, directed by the Democratic Party, to reorient these mass, multi-racial demonstrations against police violence and social inequality in a racialist direction. City

officials and school boards in Washington D.C., Boston and San Francisco formed commissions and announced “studies” that would propose to “redress” objectionable art and place names. As Lightfoot’s office described it, the Monuments Project would be “a racial healing and historical reckoning.”

This “historical reckoning” is aimed at the American Revolution and Civil War, and Lincoln is the central target.

In Boston, a famous statue that metaphorically depicts Lincoln freeing the slaves has already been removed, based on the claim that the symbol of the kneeling slave—the central iconographic image of the abolitionist movement—is degrading. The original version, which sits in Lincoln Park in Washington D.C., has also been targeted for removal.

According to the racials, such imagery denies the slaves their “agency in freeing themselves.” Yet they also insist that slavery in the American South was equivalent to the Holocaust, in the telling of *New York Times* staff writer Nikole Hannah-Jones, and that it exercised an “innermost control over the bodies of [the] enslaved work force,” as Matthew Desmond put it in the 1619 Project. How this system of “sheer brutality” was overcome by the slaves themselves, and why it happened only during the Civil War after 250 years of American slavery, was evidently not discussed in the removal of Boston’s monument. Racial mythmaking is as unencumbered by logic as it is history.

As was the case in Boston, in Chicago the Monuments Project is attempting to fob off the campaign to remove Lincoln as a “public discussion.” This is a lie. The committee will host a handful of meetings closed to just 20 participants before it makes a final decision. Far from being any kind of democratic initiative, the decision to remove the artwork sits solely with the mayor and her committee. Lightfoot’s lieutenant, Christine Carrino, has since announced that because the “Chicago Monuments Project advisory committee is not a ‘public body’” disclosure rules do not apply to it. Deliberations are secret, in other words.

In the mayor’s star chamber the statues to Lincoln and the others face charges of whether or not they promote “narratives of white supremacy,” have “connections to racist acts, slavery and genocide,” or are not sufficiently inclusive of “other stories.” Sitting in judgment is a 30-member committee, selected by Lightfoot, that includes not a single historian of the Civil War or the American Revolution.

Many of the statues are works of genuine artistic achievement. The *Standing Lincoln* sculpture (also known as *Lincoln: The Man*) is the centerpiece of Chicago’s Lincoln Park and is, according to the Lincoln Park Conservancy, “considered the most important sculpture of Abraham Lincoln from the nineteenth century,” designed by “Irish sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens (1848-1907) who became one of the foremost sculptors of his time.” The other targeted Lincoln statues include *Seated Lincoln* (1908), also by Saint-Gaudens and famed architect Stanford White, *Lincoln Rail Splitter* (1905) by Charles Mulligan, *Young Lincoln* (1951) by Charles Keck, and *Lincoln* (1956) by Lloyd Ostendorf and Avar Fairbanks.

Two monuments to Washington make the list. One of these, called the “Robert Morris-George Washington-Haym Salomon Monument,” quotes on its base from a speech Washington gave to a synagogue in Rhode Island in 1790. It begins: “The government of United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance. ...” An accompanying bronze plaque states: “Symbol of American tolerance and unity and of the cooperation of people of all races and creeds in the building of the United States.” One assumes that the irony of removing such a monument is lost on Lightfoot’s committee.

Historical ironies abound. Lincoln would surely not recognize today’s Republican Party as his own. The attempted fascist coup of January 6, and the Republicans’ refusal to recognize the outcome of the election, finds a parallel instead in the actions of the southern Democrats in 1860, who made war “rather than let the nation survive” in response to his own

election, as Lincoln put it in his Second Inaugural.

But Lincoln would recognize something of today’s Democratic Party. In his own time, he tangled with the period’s foremost Democrat, Stephen A. Douglas—whose statue in Chicago is not on Lightfoot’s list—in their famous series of debates in small Illinois towns in 1858 and going forward to the election of 1860, in which Douglas stood for a Democratic Party that had been split, North and South.

Lincoln’s struggle against Douglas followed a pattern. Lincoln wanted to talk about slavery. Douglas wanted to talk about race. Lincoln wished to mobilize the electorate against the further expansion of slavery, a system of extreme labor exploitation that denied the most fundamental right to self-ownership and offended the founding American principle of equality. Douglas, in turn, sought to obscure slavery through the promotion of the idea of permanent racial differences.

When Douglas said, for example, that Lincoln wanted to end slavery so that he could “amalgamate” the races and take a black wife, Lincoln understood Douglas’ method as an appeal to racism. But Lincoln nonetheless insisted, of the hypothetical black woman, that “in her natural right to eat the bread she earns with her own hands without asking leave of any one else, she is my equal, and the equal of all others.”

One-hundred-and-sixty-three years later, a black woman is mayor of Chicago and heads up its Democratic Party, an outcome made possible by the Civil War—and one which Douglas in his most fevered rhetoric never could have imagined. But in a more fundamental sense Lightfoot is Douglas’ direct political descendant.

Like Douglas in the 1850s, Lightfoot does not want any discussion of labor exploitation. The mayor has just sent tens of thousands of workers—teachers and staff—back into unsafe classrooms in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic, which scientists warn is on the verge of its deadliest explosion yet. There are 500,000 Chicagoans who live below the official poverty line, and, according to one food charity, the city is experiencing its “biggest hunger crisis ever,” with 800,000 people not having enough to eat. Meanwhile, some \$60 billion in wealth is hoarded by Illinois billionaires, a group headlined by Lightfoot’s Chicago allies Sam Zell and the Pritzker family. Naturally enough, just as Douglas did before her, Lightfoot wants to talk about race, not class. This is the real aim of her Monuments Project.

The Democratic Party oversees conditions of explosive inequality in cities across the country. That they once again target Abraham Lincoln reflects the degree to which the entire ruling class lives in mortal fear of a third American revolution. No other figure in American history is so synonymous with the struggle for equality, and the use of revolutionary means to achieve it, as Lincoln.



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