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## Abraham Lincoln: Hero to the Slaves?

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Abraham Lincoln has been memorialized as the man who ended slavery. According to American lore, he freed the slaves and reunited the country at a time of political turmoil. However, freeing the slaves was never the focal point of Lincoln's political agenda. Emancipation never entered his thoughts until midway through the Civil War. Lincoln always had opinions on the question of slavery, but he never voiced a paramount position on the question. He saw slavery as morally wrong, but believed that it would eventually end. This is the common trend running through his life to the emancipation of the slaves. Analyzing his early life, Illinois political career, the Lincoln-Douglas debates, and his presidency reveals the political neutrality that Lincoln held towards slavery.<sup>1</sup>

Born in 1809 in Kentucky, Lincoln spent most of his life in southern Indiana until he moved to Illinois with his father once he turned twenty-one.<sup>2</sup> The state of Kentucky had a large population of slaves that resided on primarily small farms. It was not like Virginia (his father's home state), which relied heavily on a plantation based system of slavery. Some of Lincoln's relatives owned slaves in Kentucky. His uncle Isaac owned forty-three slaves until he died in 1834.<sup>3</sup> Slavery was in part why Lincoln and his family moved to Indiana. Lincoln's father and mother held a distaste for slavery. They were members of the South Fork Baptist Church, a religious group sharply divided over slavery. Lincoln's parents belonged to an antislavery congregation,<sup>4</sup> which undoubtedly influenced how their son felt about the morality of slavery. Coming from a religious family that held antislavery values would be a catalyst for his moral objections to slavery throughout his political career. Lincoln's parents did not become active in abolitionist movements however. They were strict Calvinist predestinarians, and they believed that one's actions bared no weight on their eventual salvation, so they mostly kept to themselves in the realm of abolition.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The issue of Lincoln and slavery has garnered much attention from historians. Broadly speaking, historiographical divisions fall into two camps (with some coming down between camps): those who see Lincoln as sympathetic to the abolitionist cause, and those who see the sixteenth president as indifferent to the peculiar institution. During the 1990s, James McPherson took the pro-Lincoln position and Ira Berlin stressed the president's inconsistencies and argued that the slaves self-emancipated. See James M. McPherson, "Who Freed the Slaves?" *Reconstruction* 2, no. 3 (1994): 35-40; and Ira Berlin, "Emancipation and Its Meaning in American Life," *Reconstruction* 2, no. 3 (1994): 41-44. Since then, key historians have presented Lincoln as generally antislavery although not without some complications: Thomas L. Krannawitter, *Vindicating Lincoln: Defending the Politics of Our Greatest President* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008); Allen Guelzo, *Redeeming the Great Emancipator* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016); Brian Dirck, *Lincoln Emancipated: The President and the Politics of Race* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2007); and Mark E. Neely, "Lincoln, Slavery, and the Nation," *Journal of American History* 96, no. 2 (September 2009), 456-259. Eric Foner, *The Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln and American Slavery* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010), stakes out a middle ground, situating the president within the culture and politics of his times. To Foner, Lincoln was a complex emancipator. For a very negative view of Lincoln see Thomas DiLorenzo, *The Real Lincoln: A New Look at Abraham Lincoln, His Agenda, and an Unnecessary War* (Roseville, CA: Prima, 2002), and *Lincoln Unmasked: What You're Not Supposed to Know about Dishonest Abe* (New York: Crown Forum, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> Foner, 3-4.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 5.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 5.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 5.

Once Lincoln and his family moved to Indiana and eventually to Illinois, they did not encounter slavery as often. This was due to the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 which prohibited slavery in northern territories. Early on in Lincoln's life, his views on slavery were already being shaped. Due to his family life, he already questioned slavery. In the environment in which he lived, slavery was not the means of economic production, so he was surrounded in a community that was not dependent on slavery. Lincoln then, early on, did not have strong abolitionist feelings towards slavery. In his private life, Lincoln held moral objections to slavery, but he did not make them the focus of his public life and political career.

Lincoln for most of his life did not personally encounter slavery. He only knew little of the institution, and, for the most part, he lived in relative isolation on the periphery of slavery. The first interaction that Lincoln had with slavery did not come until 1828 and 1831 when he was traveling down the Ohio and Mississippi rivers transporting farm goods to New Orleans to sell them.<sup>6</sup> This was a 2,000-mile round trip which exposed Lincoln to various types of slavery and blacks in general. There were more than just slaves on both cotton and sugar plantations that Lincoln encountered. One night Lincoln and his companions were almost robbed by blacks, but they managed to drive them away.<sup>7</sup> It was in these trips that Lincoln is believed to have formed his personal opinions on slavery. During the 1831 trip to New Orleans John Hanks, one of the crew members that Lincoln traveled with, claimed "we saw negroes chained, maltreated, whipped and scourged. Lincoln saw it. His heart bled...I can say knowingly that it was on this trip that he formed his opinions of slavery."<sup>8</sup> This, however, was mostly speculation, since Hanks did not travel the entire voyage and left when the group reached St. Louis. The claim by Hanks is left to speculation as what he personally felt and that it was the same in his companions. The only surviving reference to these voyages is the incident in which Lincoln and his companions were attacked by blacks.

Lincoln began his political career in the 1830s and became a member of the Whig party. He voted in the 1832 election for the first time and voted for Henry Clay for president. Lincoln strongly admired Clay and referred to him as "my beau ideal of a statesman."<sup>9</sup> Clay believed that slavery was a terrible institution and emancipation must be a gradual process that would eventually lead to the colonization of the free blacks. Lincoln would come to share these convictions and would often cite Clay when discussing his own feelings towards slavery. During the 1850s, Lincoln frequently would quote or paraphrase Clay, claiming, "I can express all my views of the slavery question, by quotations from Henry Clay."<sup>10</sup> Relying so on Clay for his opinions on slavery, hardly meant Lincoln shared the exact same feelings on slavery. As a young politician at the time and just joining the emerging Whig Party, Lincoln may have wanted to keep with the status quo and support the presidential nominee and earn himself connections within the party.

During Lincoln's time in the Whig Party, there was a growing conflict between the abolitionist movement and those that followed the colonization plan. Lincoln would deny any affiliation with the abolitionists. Instead, he offered general support for vague plans to colonize former slaves. During Lincoln's tenure in the Illinois legislature from 1834 to 1842, there was not much discussion on this conflict over slavery. When it did come up in discussion, Lincoln maneuvered himself apart from his colleagues in both parties.<sup>11</sup> One example of this comes from January 1837 by way of Joseph Duncan, Democratic governor of Illinois. Duncan came before the legislature and informed members that southern states wanted northern support in condemning

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 8.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 9.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 10, Neely 456.

<sup>9</sup> Foner, 18.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 19.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 24.

abolitionists.<sup>12</sup> A committee came together, headed by Lincoln friend and prominent Whig Orville H. Browning, charged with meeting the southern states' request, but it stopped short of making an argument in support of slavery. The committee issued a report that defended the right to own slaves in the constitution, but it was written with an argument in support of colonization.<sup>13</sup> There were a series of resolutions regarding this report. The third resolution was of importance to Lincoln. It condemned the idea of abolition in the District of Columbia without the consent of the white citizens living in Washington, D.C.<sup>14</sup> Lincoln wanted to make an amendment to that resolution to be added at the end: "unless the people of the said District petition for the same."<sup>15</sup> This amendment was not approved, and Lincoln was only one of six members of the House that did not vote in favor of the resolutions. Lincoln followed up this vote with a protest in coordination with Representative Daniel Stone, another Whig from Sangamon County. Together they stated "that the institution of slavery is founded on both injustice and bad policy; but that the promulgation of abolition doctrines tends rather to increase than to abate its evils. They believed that the Congress of the United States had no power, under the constitution, to interfere with the institution of slavery in the different States. They believe that the Congress of the United States had the power, under the constitution, to abolish slavery in the District of Columbia; but that that power ought not to be exercised unless at the request of the people of said District."<sup>16</sup>

This episode suggests that Lincoln had begun to form his own interpretations of the constitution and how it coincided with his views of slavery. He felt that it was within the power of the government to abolish slavery, but only if that is what the people of that state wanted, "popular sovereignty" as it was known. If the state wanted to keep slavery, then it is the responsibility of the government to adhere to that.

By 1852, Lincoln had begun to develop his antislavery ideas, but not an antislavery ideology. He cast votes opposing slavery but did not spearhead plans as to pursue antislavery policy within the Illinois political system.<sup>17</sup> It was not until the Kansas-Nebraska issue that Lincoln came on the national scene with a proposition on the question of slavery. It came as a response to the proposed plan by Senator Stephen A. Douglas (D-IL) to organize the Nebraska territory based on popular sovereignty. Lincoln gave a speech on October 16<sup>th</sup>, 1854, in Peoria, IL, strongly criticizing the proposed policy of westward expansion of slavery.<sup>18</sup> His words were wrought with fiery emotion as he assailed the immorality of the plan proposed by Douglas. "This is the repeal of the Missouri Compromise...I think, and shall try to show, that it is wrong; wrong in its direct effect, letting slavery into Kansas and Nebraska—and wrong in its prospective principle, allowing it to spread to every other part of the wide world, where men can be found inclined to take it," blasted Lincoln.<sup>19</sup> Finally Lincoln made a resounding stance on slavery. This speech would help put him on the national scene and push him into prominence within the Republican Party.

Lincoln made his voice heard in the October 16<sup>th</sup>, 1854, speech in Peoria. He was also careful to not let his emotions take the better of him in this speech. As he explained:

Before proceeding, let me say I think I have no prejudice against the Southern people. They are just what we would be in their situation. If slavery did not now exist amongst

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 24.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 25.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 25.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 25.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 25.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 62.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 63.

<sup>19</sup> Abraham Lincoln, "Speech on the Kansas-Nebraska Act at Peoria, Illinois, October 16, 1854," in *Abraham Lincoln, Slavery, and the Civil War: Selected Speeches and Writings*, ed. Michael P. Johnson (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2001), 45.

them, they would not introduce it. If it did now exist among us, we should not instantly give it up. This I believe of the masses north and south. Doubtless there are individuals, on both sides, who would not hold slaves under any circumstances; and others who would gladly introduce slavery anew, if it were out of existence. We know that some southern men do free their slaves, go north, and become tip-top abolitionists; while some northern ones go south, and become most cruel slave-masters.<sup>20</sup>

This statement helped Lincoln show that he was by no means endorsing abolition. He was framing his speech on the grounds of his outrage that such a policy would be proposed. This speech did however show his moral objections to slavery, and this led to a question of his stance on slavery in 1858 when Lincoln ran for the Illinois senate seat against Stephen A. Douglas.

Prior to the debates between Lincoln and Douglas in 1858, there was a moment in which Lincoln took the time to respond to the Dred Scott decision and the Lecompton Constitution. At the Republican state convention in Springfield on June 16, 1858, Lincoln issued his famous “House divided” speech. This was the speech that Lincoln had delivered after being nominated by the Republican Party to run for the U.S. Senate seat. Lincoln set out in particular to assail the notion that Republicans could support Douglas’ position on Kansas-Nebraska in the hope that it would solve the slavery conundrum.<sup>21</sup> In this speech Lincoln declared:

We are now into the fifth year, since a policy was initiated, with the avowed object, and confident promise, of putting an end to slavery agitation. Under the operation of that policy, that agitation has not only, not ceased, but has constantly augmented. In my opinion, it will not cease, until a crisis shall have been reached, and passed. ‘A house divided against itself cannot stand.’ I believe this government cannot endure, permanently half slave and half free.<sup>22</sup>

Lincoln’s opening statement inspired a sense of awe in many at the convention that day. Others reacted with hostility and anxiety about the meaning behind his words.<sup>23</sup> Lincoln wisely showed that as a politician he was concerned with the present state of affairs on the issue of slavery without precisely committing himself to a course of action. He simply argued that the lack of progress on the slavery issue was causing unrest in government.

The buildup to the senate race of 1858 between Lincoln and Douglas began during the Kansas-Nebraska debate of 1854. Lincoln was put into the political spotlight of the Republican Party in Illinois after his blistering speech at Peoria that year. He would run in 1858 against standing Senator Stephen A. Douglas, a member of the Democratic Party.

This would be troublesome for Lincoln, because until then he had managed to keep his personal beliefs about slavery in the back of the peoples’ minds. Two weeks into the campaign Norman Judd, a member of the Republican state committee, felt that Lincoln was trailing drastically behind Douglas. He and the committee urged that Lincoln meet Douglas on the same stage in an open debate.<sup>24</sup> Lincoln was not a supporter of this plan of action. He and others worried that since Douglas was the celebrity and effective orator, the senator would be able to use his experience and popularity to his advantage, especially in front of a crowd.<sup>25</sup> This was one concern for Lincoln, but the challenger also fretted over the question of slavery. He knew his objections to the Kansas-

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 45-46.

<sup>21</sup> Foner, 99.

<sup>22</sup> Abraham Lincoln, “‘A House Divided’ Speech at Springfield, Illinois, June 16, 1858,” in *Abraham Lincoln, Slavery, and the Civil War*, 63.

<sup>23</sup> Allen C. Guelzo, *Lincoln and Douglas: The Debates that Defined America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2008), 62-63.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 90.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 90.

Nebraska Act would be discussed. Lincoln would play this cleverly in the debates, avoiding any clear response to the question, but he would still garner support from the answers.

Looking at the type of argumentation that Lincoln used shows just how careful he was in his answers and speeches during the debates. Coming into the debates, Douglas was to strike first on the question of slavery, opening his speech by challenging Lincoln. “We are told by Lincoln that he is utterly opposed to the Dred Scott decision and will not submit to it for the reason that he says it deprives the negro of the rights and privileges of citizenship,” blasted Douglas.<sup>26</sup> This would force Lincoln into a response and put him at an immediate disadvantage with the crowd at Ottawa, Illinois. Within the hour that Douglas spoke, he led the crowd to believe that Lincoln was an abolitionist conspirator that was out to seduce the old Whigs into an abolition cause.<sup>27</sup> The claims that Douglas had made were not false. Lincoln had consistently voted against the interests of the country and his own state. He did want equality of all men. Lincoln responded with care. He would begin to make his climb back into contention with his speech.

Lincoln’s response to Douglas greatly surprised those in attendance. The crowd saw for the first time Lincoln’s great skills as an orator. He opened his comments with, “This is the true complexion of all I have ever said in regard to the institutions of slavery and the black race. This is the whole of it, and anything that argues me into his idea of perfect social and political equality with the negro, is but a specious and fantastic arrangement of words, by which a man can prove a horse chestnut to be a chestnut horse.”<sup>28</sup> This was a smart tactic by Lincoln; elements of the accusations made by Douglas, he acknowledged, were in fact true, but the senator had gone out of his way to try and make it seem that Lincoln was an avid abolitionist—and this was absurd. Lincoln then followed up by reassuring the crowd about his true stance on slavery. “I will say here, while upon this subject, that I have no purpose directly or indirectly to interfere with the institution of slavery in the States where it exists. I believe that I have no lawful right to do so, and I have no inclination to do so.”<sup>29</sup> Lincoln aimed to persuade the crowd that he had no policy towards abolition, and he had no intentions of making such a policy. Lincoln also made no attempt to answer any of the questions that Douglas had raised during his speech. As a speaker, Lincoln avoided responding to questions without preparation. He preferred to wait until he had given questions more careful thought, but given the demands of the debate, he would not have this opportunity.<sup>30</sup> This worked well for Lincoln in this first debate at Ottawa. When Douglas issued his rebuttal to Lincoln, he was met with heckling and taunting. Mayor Joseph Glover of Ottawa had to step up to the stage and demand that the crowd be quiet so Douglas could speak.<sup>31</sup>

The debates that followed featured much the same tone. Lincoln proved to be a worthy adversary to Douglas. In the end, conventional wisdom held that Lincoln won the debates, but he still lost the senate seat to Douglas. Lincoln did score a victory in that he was now a nationally recognized figure. His ability to inspire voters and remain as close to neutral as he could on the issue of slavery appealed to many Republicans. Lincoln had managed to still hide his true feelings on the subject of slavery. He was able to articulate an argument that posited slavery as morally wrong, but he offered no opinion as to whether or not slavery should be abolished. Some may have perceived his moral standpoint as amounting to a justification for abolition, but as a politician his vagueness served him well.

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<sup>26</sup> Stephen A. Douglas, “Douglas at Ottawa, August 21, 1858,” in *Illinois War: The Civil War in Documents*, ed. Mark Hubbard (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2013), 40.

<sup>27</sup> Guelzo, 121.

<sup>28</sup> Abraham Lincoln, “First Lincoln-Douglas Debate, August 21, 1858,” in *Abraham Lincoln, Slavery, and the Civil War*, 72.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>30</sup> Guelzo, 125.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

The debates helped Lincoln so much that he received the Republican nomination for president in 1860. His views placed him comfortably in the Republican middle ground. Lincoln occupied this middle ground both ideologically and geographically. He could carry the north and therefore the Electoral College, but he was not radical enough that he would send the union into a state of crisis—or so it seemed.<sup>32</sup> As Lincoln prepared to begin his campaign for presidency, he was given the opportunity to speak in New York at the Cooper Institute on February 27, 1860.<sup>33</sup> There, Lincoln would respond to criticisms made by abolitionist-inclined Senator William H. Seward (R-NY), moderate Stephen Douglas, and states' rights supporter Chief Justice Roger B. Taney—essentially the entire political spectrum. He would also use this speech to begin to introduce his position on slavery to audiences in the northeastern United States.<sup>34</sup>

In New York, Lincoln argued that slavery should not be eliminated or extended beyond where it presently exists:

Let all who believe that our fathers, who framed the Government under which we live, understood this question just as well, and even better, than we do now, speak as they spoke, and act as they acted upon it. This is all Republicans ask—all Republicans desire—in relation to slavery. As those fathers marked it, so let it be again marked, as an evil not to be extended, but to be tolerated and protected only because of and so far as its actual presence among us makes that toleration and protection a necessity. Let all guaranties those fathers gave it, be, not grudgingly, but fully and fairly maintained.<sup>35</sup>

Here Lincoln rallied Republicans toward a middle ground: let slavery remain and be protected where it exists, but prohibit its expansion. These views, he insisted, were shared by his fellow Republicans and the founding fathers. The Cooper Union address showed that the Republicans were going to follow a policy of not interfering with slavery where it stood. This was a plan that did not call for abolition and would greatly help Lincoln on his journey to the presidency.

Lincoln won the 1860 election beating out the other candidates by a large margin. This margin, however, was only in the Electoral College; Lincoln did not gain a dominating lead amongst the popular vote. This win would only cause Lincoln more headache than adulation. The crisis over the question of slavery was escalating, and the new president needed to make it clear as to how he was going to approach this issue. He did this in his first inaugural address on March 4, 1861. Before he could even give this speech, seven slave states declared their independence and formed the Confederate States of America. On March 4, Lincoln acknowledged, “Apprehension seems to exist among the people of the Southern States, that by the accession of a Republican Administration, their property, and their peace, and personal security, are to be endangered. There has never been any reasonable cause for such apprehension. Indeed, the amplest evidence to the contrary has all the while existed, and been open to their inspection. It is found in nearly all the published speeches of him who now addresses you.”<sup>36</sup> Lincoln clearly was growing frustrated with the developing situation. He had made attempts to appeal to the South to assure citizens neither he nor his administration was going to touch their property where it exists. At this point he had done all he could on the question of slavery, and he turned his attention to the coming war.

Throughout the war, Lincoln made clear that he was trying to quell the rebellion and not free the slaves. Not until later in the war did Lincoln begin to consider the idea of emancipation. But emancipation was hardly a way for Lincoln to unveil his inner abolitionist, rather it was a wartime

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 132.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 136.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 136.

<sup>35</sup> Lincoln, “Address at Cooper Institute, February 27, 1860,” in *Abraham Lincoln, Slavery, and the Civil War*, 83.

<sup>36</sup> Abraham Lincoln, “First Inaugural Address March 4, 1861,” in *Abraham Lincoln, Slavery, and the Civil War*, 108-109.

strategy to severely hurt the infrastructure of the Confederacy. In a letter to newspaper publisher Horace Greeley, Lincoln responded to the criticisms that Greeley made of the president and the confiscation acts that he had issued.<sup>37</sup> Lincoln wrote to Greeley privately, showing his frustration with the war and the issue of slavery. “My paramount object in this struggle is to save the Union, and is not either to save or to destroy slavery,” he wrote. “If I could save the Union without freeing any slave I would do it, and if I could save it by freeing all the slaves I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone I would also do that. What I do about slavery, and the colored race, I do because I believe it helps to save the Union.”<sup>38</sup> Emancipation, in short, was hardly the president’s priority. Lincoln only emancipated the slaves to save the Union—not for its moral reasons or to be the savior of the “colored” race, but because it was needed to save the Union from this rebellion.

When emancipation finally came, it came off the heels of a resounding victory at Antietam for the Union forces. This was the victory that Lincoln needed to announce such a monumental proclamation. This move would change America forever, and Lincoln chose his words carefully. In the proclamation Lincoln states,

That it is my purpose, upon the next meeting of Congress to again recommend the adoption of a practical measure tendering pecuniary aid to the free acceptance or rejection of all slave-states, so called, the people whereof may not then be in rebellion against the United States, and which states, may then have voluntarily adopted, or thereafter may voluntarily adopt, immediate, or gradual abolishment of slavery within their respective limits.<sup>39</sup>

Here was where Lincoln finally made known his policy on slavery. After years of eloquently dancing around the question, he made a stand. He did not directly free the slaves in this proclamation as it states that the southern states must adopt a policy that involves emancipation. It was not by his hand that the slaves were free, he rather made it a policy that, for the slave states to be readmitted to the Union, they must adopt a policy of emancipation. In a way, this left the overall emancipation in the hands of the slave states.

Abraham Lincoln was not the savior of the slaves. He never took a clear stand on slavery until 1862. He made known his moral objections to slavery, but not his personal beliefs that slaves should or should not be free. As he became more involved in politics, he was forced to become more open on the question of slavery. His moral stands on the issue and insistence that it was not his place to free the slaves won him praise and criticism. This attitude carried him to the White House where he could avoid the issue no longer. His final stand was not made with the sole purpose of freeing the slaves. It was done so that he could save the Union. Freeing the slaves was never a specific goal for Lincoln. It only became a goal when he saw the opportunity it offered to preserve the great nation to which he was prepared to offer his “last full measure of devotion.”

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<sup>37</sup> Lincoln to Horace Greeley, August 22, 1862, in *Abraham Lincoln, Slavery, and the Civil War*, 204.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, 205.

<sup>39</sup> Abraham Lincoln, “Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation September 22, 1862,” in *Abraham Lincoln, Slavery, and the Civil War*, 206.