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## **Book Review**

**by Richard M. Ebeling**

*The Real Lincoln: A New Look at Abraham Lincoln, His Agenda, and an Unnecessary War* by Thomas DiLorenzo (Roseville, Calif.; Prima Publishing, 2002); 333 pages; \$24.95.

In his books *Race and Economics* (1975) and *Markets and Minorities* (1981), free-market economist Thomas Sowell explained and analyzed the nature and workings of the slave economy in the pre-Civil War American South. He emphasized that there were a number of unique and special qualities of the slave experience in the United States that distinguished it from slavery in many other parts of the world in the 19th century.

First, slavery was being practiced in a country formally dedicated since its founding to the principles of individual freedom and democratic order. This meant that to justify (in 1860) holding in slavery 4 million people out of a total population of 31 million in the United States required defining the enslaved as inferior and unfit for freedom. Slavery had to be defended not merely as economically beneficial to those who were slaveholders but as the best of all possible systems for those who were held in permanent bondage. Indeed, some, such as Jefferson Davis, argued that enslaved blacks were far better off than the “free persons of color” in the Northern states.

Second, for a wide area of the Deep South, slavery was economically profitable. This applied most particularly to the predominantly cotton-growing areas. Cotton growing for the most part required simple, unskilled plantation field labor for planting and picking the crop. The slave population could be kept in ignorance and without skills while being watched by a handful of overseers to ensure that the minimal-skill-type work was performed and to prevent slaves’ attempting to escape or do harm to their owners or their property.

Third, the mark of slavery — both to rationalize it and to minimize the cost of identifying those in the slave status — was based on race. That made catching runaway slaves an easier process and defined and delineated the boundary between the characteristics of a free man and those of a slave.

But Sowell also emphasized that slavery had its costs, both to the slave owners and to the people of the South in general. To prevent slaves from acquiring the knowledge and the means of opposing their slavery or trying to make their escape required keeping them in illiterate ignorance. But that limited their usefulness as a privately owned “capital asset” for anything other than low- or minimal-skill fieldwork or household duties for the master and his family.

It also required limits on freedom for the white population in the South. There were censorship laws that prohibited advocating abolition or disseminating abolitionist ideas or literature. The U.S. mail was inspected and seized by the Southern state governments when it was suspected of containing “subversive” ideas. It restrained intellectual freedom and discourse in Southern universities. It acted as a deterrent for attracting northern businessmen and their capital investments that would have assisted in raising the material standard of living and quality of life in the South. And it created an anti-work cultural attitude among many Southern whites, who argued that many forms of everyday normal labor and enterprise were fit only for slaves.

But in spite of these tendencies, Sowell also explained, there were counterforces at work in many parts of the old South that were breaking down the slave culture, attitudes, and institutions.

There were many activities, including tobacco growing, forestry, and fishing, in which unskilled slave labor was inherently inefficient. And this was most especially the case in the growing urban and city areas of the South. Here slaves needed skills and education and mobility to perform the manufacturing and service-industry tasks of a market-based system of division of labor.

Slaves were often allowed or expected to find their own employment, housing, and amenities, while simply giving a portion of their market earnings to their nominal masters. Urban blacks, therefore, lived more on a contract and employer-employee basis. They had the time and ability to learn, read about, and realize the possibilities of freedom. And they formed secret associations to go out to the rural areas to clandestinely school the plantation slaves and educate them in the idea of freedom.

That the state governments in the Deep South had to continually pass laws against the educating of the plantation slaves and to impose various penalties for doing so suggests the increasing extent to which slavery was threatened with being undermined. The market economy and its cultural spillover effects were slowly but surely eating away at this “peculiar institution” of the American South. It also suggests that even without the Civil War, which cost the lives of 620,000 people and untold hardship and destruction for millions more, slavery would have come to an end in the United States, and most likely in a peaceful manner, in the same way it had in almost all other parts of the world in the 19th century.

This lengthy prologue may help to set a context for the arguments that Thomas DiLorenzo makes in his new book, *The Real Lincoln: A New Look at Abraham Lincoln, His Agenda, and an Unnecessary War*. Abraham Lincoln has been elevated almost to the status of a political deity in American history, a deity who “preserved the Union” and “freed the slaves.” In comparison with all the works that have been written on Lincoln and the Civil War, few directly challenge this image. (See the review of *When in the Course of Human Events: Arguing the Case for Southern Secession*, by Charles Adams in *Freedom Daily*, November 2000.)

### **Lincoln's economic philosophy**

DiLorenzo explains that from the time of his entry into politics, Lincoln was devoted to the principles of what the 19th-century economist Henry Carey had labeled the “American System.” Its three leading tenets were protectionism, “internal improvements” (government-subsidized canal and railway development, and other related interventionist policies), and a national banking system. Drawing upon Lincoln’s speeches and letters, DiLorenzo is able to show that Lincoln’s entire “domestic policy agenda” was focused on advancing these three goals.

Manufacturing was mostly centered in the Northern and New England states, where the greatest special-interest pressure was concentrated to lobby for high tariffs and other trade barriers to keep out less-expensive and better-quality European and, especially, British industrial goods. The South, on the other hand, was the main exporting region of the country, specializing in cotton, tobacco, and other goods, and it imported most of the finished goods consumed by the Southern population. Thus, the high tariffs and trade barriers hit the Southern states the hardest, while the greater portion of the import taxes collected by the federal government was spent in the Northern states. And Lincoln wholeheartedly supported a system of high tariffs.

From the time of Alexander Hamilton, there had been a sizable segment in the business and political community that argued that economic development and geographical unification of the country could not be left up to the competitive forces of the market. The federal government needed to direct and plan development and national unification by subsidizing transportation and communication facilities. There had been many politically scandalous and economically wasteful experiments with “internal improvement” projects at the state levels. But in spite of these failures, Lincoln was part of that segment of the political establishment who wanted to expand them to the national level. The greatest resistance to them often came from the representatives of the Southern states in Congress.

Finally, there were those who wanted a national central banking system to supply cheap credit and loans both to fund these government “internal improvements” and to provide a money source from which various special-interest groups could support various segments of the political establishment in Washington and selected state capitals. Historically, many of the Southern states had resisted a centralized banking system as a threat to their economic interests and well-being. Lincoln was a strong supporter of a national banking system.

Those were the real, leading factors, DiLorenzo reasons, that were behind Southern secession. With the coming of Lincoln into the White House in March 1861, many of the Southern states believed that he would dramatically push for all the elements in this agenda of greatly increased federal government spending and control.

### **Lincoln and slavery**

As for the slavery issue, DiLorenzo makes clear that for Lincoln freeing the slaves was merely a pragmatic political tool that he decided to use when the war had been going badly for the Union side for a long time. The Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 freed slaves only in those areas of the South still under Confederate control, but not in other states or in those parts of the Southern states under Union military occupation.

While opposed philosophically to slavery, Lincoln had long argued that it was constitutionally legal and could not be overthrown without a constitutional change or by the states themselves. He did not believe in the equality of blacks and whites, thinking that blacks were inferior to the white population in general. He opposed integration and intermarriage, did not think that freed slaves should be given full legal and voting rights equal to whites, and forcefully advocated before and during the Civil War that all blacks should be deported by government subsidy either back to Africa or to the West Indies.

### **War crimes and civil liberties**

In addition, DiLorenzo chronicles in detail the brutality and destruction of the Union army's conquest of the Southern states. In contradiction to established international norms and customs of warfare, which were taught at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, the Union armies looted and burned the private property of noncombatants, destroyed entire cities and towns, and ruined large portions of the countryside.

In addition, thousands of opponents of Lincoln's war policies were arrested and imprisoned for the duration of the conflict, including dozens of newspaper editors and publishers. The writ of habeas corpus was revoked, and mail and press censorship was imposed. Taxes were dramatically increased and a national banking system was established that made the new paper money, "greenbacks," legal tender, resulting in the worst inflation in U.S. history since the American Revolution.

Lincoln and his war, DiLorenzo concludes, set the tone and implemented the policies that were the beginning of centralized and intrusive government in America. Therefore, Lincoln's policies and war represented the beginning of the end for the idea of limited government that the Founding Fathers had tried to institute through the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution.

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