

# Demolishing the Lincoln Myth

By David Gordon - Mises.org, July 25, 2020

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The Problem with Lincoln is the culmination of Tom DiLorenzo's many years of research on Abraham Lincoln. It is a masterly summing-up and extension of his earlier classics *The Real Lincoln* (2002) and *Lincoln Unmasked* (2006). DiLorenzo is both a historian and an economist with an expert knowledge of Austrian economics and also of the public choice school. This background enables him to grasp what most other historians of the Civil War period miss, the centralizing economic plan behind Lincoln's policies.

**DiLorenzo calls attention to a vital fact that demolishes the mythological view that Lincoln's primary motive for opposing secession in 1861 was his distaste for slavery. Precisely the opposite is true. It is well known that, in an effort to promote compromise, a constitutional amendment was proposed in Congress that forever forbade interference with slavery in states where it already existed. Lincoln referred to the proposal, the Corwin Amendment, in his first inaugural, stating that he was not opposed to the amendment, since it merely made explicit the existing constitutional arrangement regarding slavery. Of course, Lincoln was not telling the truth; nothing in the Constitution prior to the Corwin Amendment prohibited amendments to end slavery, so this new proposal did not just make the existing constitutional arrangement explicit. Readers can judge the Corwin Amendment for themselves, in a helpful set of original documents that our author includes in the book. (The Corwin Amendment is on p. 217.)**

**The Problem with Lincoln. DiLorenzo, Thomas J. Buy New \$29.99**

So much is well established, but DiLorenzo adds a surprising touch. Far from viewing the Corwin Amendment with grudging consent, Lincoln was in fact its behind-the-scenes promoter.

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**It was Lincoln himself who had instructed his soon-to-be secretary of state William Seward to suggest three resolutions, the import of the first of which was identical with that of the Corwin Amendment, to the ‘Committee of Thirteen’ in the U.S. Senate “without indicating they issued from Springfield”—that is, from Lincoln himself.**

(p. 28, quoting Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Team of Rivals*)

Extension of slavery in the territories was for Lincoln an entirely different matter, and on this issue he refused all compromise. Here we confront a paradox. If Lincoln thought it more important to preserve the Union than to oppose slavery, why was he unwilling to compromise over slavery in the territories? If he thought slavery’s extension was too high a price to pay to preserve the Union, why was he willing permanently to entrench slavery wherever it already existed? It is hard to detect a moral difference between slavery in the states and the territories.

DiLorenzo readily resolves the paradox. Lincoln opposed extension of slavery, because this would interfere with the prospects of white workers. Lincoln, following his mentor Henry Clay, favored a nationalist economic program of which high tariffs, a national bank, and governmentally financed “internal improvements” were key elements. This program, he thought, would promote not only the interests of the wealthy industrial and financial powers that he always faithfully served but would benefit white labor as well. Blacks, in his opinion, would be better off outside the United States, and throughout his life Lincoln supported schemes for repatriation of blacks to Africa and elsewhere. If blacks left the country, they could not compete with whites, the primary objects of Lincoln’s concern. (Lincoln, by the way, did not see this program as in any way in contradiction to his professed belief that all men are created equal. Blacks, he thought, had human rights but not political rights.)

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In order to finance his economic program, high tariffs were essential.

The Real Lincoln: A Ne...DiLorenzo, Thomas J. Best Price: \$4.25 Buy New \$7.48 (as of 07:05 EST - Details)

In his first inaugural address, Lincoln threw down the gauntlet of war over tax collection....He reassured the country that “there needs to be no bloodshed or violence; and there shall be none, unless it be forced upon the national authority.”

(p. 30)

DiLorenzo is appropriately scathing about Lincoln’s remarks.

The myth of the sacred Union bound together by “the mystic cords of memory” was invented to provide cover for Lincoln’s coldhearted willingness to wage total war on his own country for tax revenue....There was no talk of “force” of any kind when the subject was slavery—except for forcing runaway slaves back into slavery by enforcing the Fugitive Slave Act; tax collection, on the other hand, called forth threats of total war on the entire population of the South, threats that were carried out a few months later, leading to as many as 750,000 American deaths. (p. 31)

DiLorenzo is fully prepared for the objection that even if the Southern states had ample reason to oppose Lincoln’s economic plans, they had no legal right to secede. In this view, Lincoln had a constitutional duty to preserve the Union by any means necessary. The historian Allan Guelzo claims that Southern secessionists were guilty of treason by their efforts to leave the Union. In what to my mind is the highlight of the book, **DiLorenzo turns the tables on those who charge the Southern states with treason. The United States was a compact of sovereign**

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states, and a state that no longer wished to remain part of the Union was free to leave.

This view of the matter was not dreamed up by Southern firebrands in 1860; it had behind it the weighty authority of Thomas Jefferson.

In an August 12, 1803, letter to John C. Breckinridge of Kentucky, who had inquired about the secession movement that was gaining prominence in New England at that time, Jefferson wrote that if there is to be a “separation” then “God bless them both [that is, both regions of the union that were at odds], & keep them in the union if it be for their good, but separate them if it be better.” (p. 22, brackets in original)

Lincoln Unmasked: Thomas J. DiLorenzo

If one accepts Jefferson’s approach, Lincoln’s nationalist understanding of the United States was, as Murray Rothbard would say, “monstrous.” As DiLorenzo writes,

Lincoln justified the military invasion of his own country and the mass killing of fellow American citizens by the hundreds of thousands with a theory that the people of the “free and independent states,” as they are called in the Declaration of Independence, were not sovereign, that the Union—which is to say, the federal government—was the real sovereign; that the federal government was therefore supreme; that the Union was not voluntary; and that no state had a right to secede from it...the theory that the union of the states is older than the states themselves makes about as much sense as the theory that a marital union can be older than either spouse—in which case they would have been married before they were born....No state

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would ever have ratified the Constitution if this—Lincoln’s theory of the “more perfect Union”—was what the founding generation thought the document said. (pp. 109-11)

With a brilliant stroke, DiLorenzo reverses the verdict that leaving the Union was treason. Lincoln was the real traitor:

Lincoln’s invasion of the Southern states was the very definition of treason in Article 3, Section 3 of the U.S. Constitution, which defines treason as “only in levying war upon them, or in adhering to their enemies, giving them aid and comfort.” The “them” and “their” in this definition of treason refer to “the United States,” which are always in the plural in the founding documents, denoting that the individual, free, and independent states were uniting by a compact among them, not irrevocably surrendering their sovereignty and their very existence in favor of a sacred, perpetual, inescapable Union. (pp. 77-78)

Once Lincoln invaded the South, he and his henchmen carried on the war with great brutality. Murray Rothbard says that the Union conduct of the war

broke the 19th century rules of war by specifically plundering and slaughtering civilians, by destroying civilian life and institutions so as to reduce the South to submission. Sherman’s infamous March through Georgia was one of the great war crimes, and crimes against humanity, of the past century-and-a-half. Because by targeting and butchering civilians, Lincoln and Grant and Sherman paved the way for all the genocidal horrors of the monstrous 20th century. (quoted on p. 44)

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DiLorenzo confronts an important objection to his main argument. Even if Lincoln didn't start the war to free the slaves but rather to create a powerful central state, wasn't war still necessary to end slavery? This seems unlikely. In an appearance on Bill Maher's television program, Ron Paul "responded [to Maher] by pointing out that all other countries in the world that ended slavery in the nineteenth century did so peacefully, without a civil war, specifically citing how the British used tax dollars to buy the freedom of the slaves and then ended slavery legally throughout the British Empire" (p. 71).

DiLorenzo's forthright analysis of Lincoln stands in marked contrast to a leading member of what our author, following the usage of Lerone Bennett Jr., calls the Logos school, "which treats Lincoln's words as gospel truth. An example of this would be a statement by Lincoln scholar Harry Jaffa when I [DiLorenzo] debated him at the Independent Institute in Oakland, California, in 2003. During the question-and-answer session, an audience member — apparently a Jaffa protégé — asked Jaffa if he thought Lincoln's speeches were the words of God. Jaffa responded that yes, he thought they were." (pp. 139-40)

Readers of *The Problem with Lincoln* will be forever immune to this idolatrous nonsense.

**Note:** The views expressed on Mises.org are not necessarily those of the Mises Institute.

## The Best of David Gordon

David Gordon is Senior Fellow at the Mises Institute and Distinguished Columnist at LewRockwell.com. He is also author of *Resurrecting Marx* and *An Introduction to Economic Reasoning* and editor of numerous books including *Strictly Confidential: The Private Volker Fund Memos of Murray N. Rothbard*.