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Spielberg's *Lincoln* Fulfills the President's Emancipation Legacy

President Lincoln (Daniel Day-Lewis, center) confers with Secretary of State William Seward (David Strathairn, right) and Representative James Ashley (David Costabile, far left) in this scene from Steven Spielberg's *Lincoln*.

David Wolfford

Steven Spielberg's latest movie *Lincoln* updates our national understanding of our sixteenth president and provides a partial, artful lesson on the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment that abolished slavery. Starring Daniel Day-Lewis, this movie will become a defining work on President Abraham Lincoln's character and leadership in his final days, and will raise questions about how politicians elevated emancipation into the nation's highest law.

Most of the film coincides with a three-week legislative battle in the House of Representatives, while offering a close-up look of Lincoln's family life, the Republicans' lobbying efforts, and the floor debate over the amendment. Additional historical characters

include Mary Todd Lincoln (Sally Field), Secretary of State William Seward (David Strathairn), Republican power player Francis Preston Blair (Hal Holbrook), and abolitionist Congressman Thaddeus Stevens (Tommy Lee Jones).

Once released on DVD, teachers could use this work to teach about Lincoln's personal and administrative challenges, Civil War-era political divisions, the patronage system, or the operation of the lower house. The movie's online "Learning Hub" offers a 28-page Educator's Guide with background content and primary sources, and Lincoln scholar Harold Holzer has authored the companion book for young readers, *Lincoln: How Abraham Lincoln Ended Slavery in America*. This review will examine the film's impact on Lincoln's

image, provide some historical context, and look at its characterization of congressional emancipation.

Shaping Lincoln's Image

Abraham Lincoln lives in the American consciousness and ranks top on historians' lists because this non-privileged, ruffled lawyer rose to political prominence, preserved the Union, and freed slaves. The movie industry did much to shape the man's image with such movies as *Young Mr. Lincoln* (1939) and *Abe Lincoln in Illinois* (1940). In *Young Mr. Lincoln*, a film that only hints at Lincoln's future political career, Henry Fonda portrays Lincoln successfully defending two innocent men in an Illinois courtroom. *Abe Lincoln in Illinois* casts Raymond Massie as a rising politician, but ends with a

clinically depressed candidate winning the presidency at the worst possible time. These were the last motion pictures to fully feature Abraham Lincoln on the big screen, though he appears in cameo in westerns, assassination conspiracies, and Civil War films, because, as Tony Piplio argues, “A shorthand Lincoln was more convenient as a ready-made symbol of conscience and courage,” while a full biopic required a complicated examination of race, emancipation, or Reconstruction.¹

Spielberg’s team has broken new ground by further shaping the president’s screen persona and by filling the Hollywood void of his legacy as the Great Emancipator. Spielberg purchased the rights to Doris Kearns Goodwin’s *Team of Rivals* years before she completed it, and hired playwright Tony Kushner to turn the book into a screenplay. Daniel Day-Lewis’s Lincoln must balance his desire for emancipation with his desire to preserve the Union amid a divided Republican party, a staunch Democratic opposition, and an unstable First Lady. The actor’s subject was a folksy, humorous, storytelling sort out of the Western prairie, full of wit and dry jokes. In person, the otherwise reverent Lincoln most envision was actually an awkward and unpolished man. Day-Lewis captures the Lincoln we have all seen while adding an awkward dimension and an unfamiliar voice. Historians have confirmed that his portrayal is an accurate one. Lincoln biographer Ronald White said, “He walks like Lincoln ... he talks like Lincoln ... what comes out is the very accurate depiction of the spirit of the man.”²

The Thirteenth Amendment

In addition to revealing the man’s character, *Lincoln* also provides a lesson on the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment. The script provides minimal background to the event, but spotlights the sprint to passage in the House of Representatives, while creatively shedding light on its back-story and “Honest Abe’s” role.

Just before Lincoln’s first inauguration

in 1861, Congress had actually passed an amendment to protect slavery; but once the South seceded, and after the firing on Ft. Sumter, neither Confederate states nor Northern states saw a need to ratify it. As states seceded, seats in Congress emptied. In 1864, Republicans introduced the emancipation amendment, but had to overcome constitutional constraints. First, Democrats challenged the scope of Article V’s authority to amend the Constitution, especially a proposal to abolish an institution accepted at the framing. Also, could the House, with no Southern representation, pass any amendment? And, what constituted three-fourths of state legislatures in this time of rebellion and partially reinstated state governments? The Senate easily passed the proposal on April 8 by a vote of 38 to 6. All Republicans cast votes in favor, as did six Unionists and four Democrats. The same measure failed to reach the required two-thirds in the House on June 15 by a partisan vote of 93 to 65. All Republicans but one, and only four Democrats, voted for it.³

President Lincoln had given minimal attention to the bill, but began to embrace it by suggesting the Union party (the Republicans’ temporary banner) include this cause in its platform. He also viewed Republican victories that November, including his own, as a mandate to expand his emancipation program. “I gave ‘em a year and a half to think about it,” Day-Lewis’s character declares to skeptics about his Emancipation Proclamation, “and they re-elected me.” Lincoln won 55 percent of the popular vote and all the electoral votes except those from Kentucky, Delaware, and New Jersey (only the Union states voted in the 1864 election). In the House, Republicans gained additional seats and would have an even stronger advantage over Democrats in the following term. In his annual report to Congress on December 8, 1864, Lincoln mentioned the recent election and assured that the next Congress would pass the measure if this one did not. “Hence there is only a question of time as to when the proposed

amendment will go to the States for their action,” he declared, “may we not agree that the sooner the better?”⁴

Lincoln picks up the story in early January 1865 when Mary Todd Lincoln learns incredulously of her husband’s ambitious and politically dangerous goal. Lincoln and Secretary Seward meet with Ohio Representative James Ashley (David Costabile), the House’s chief advocate for the bill, and order him to hold the vote at the end of the month. Some scenes, such as this, may mislead viewers or misappropriate credit. Surely, Mrs. Lincoln would have already known of her husband’s insistence on putting the amendment into the party’s platform and his public endorsement in early December. Also, Congressman Ashley, an abolitionist Republican, wouldn’t have needed such pressure. The Toledo-area representative dedicated much of his political life to abolition. He introduced a similar emancipation resolution in 1861 and sponsored this amendment in the spring 1864. Ironically, Ashley was the sole Republican to vote “no” back in June for strategic reasons. An obscure House rule prevented sponsors of failed bills from reintroducing them into the same Congress unless the sponsors voted against them. In between the time when the bill was up for a vote, Ashley campaigned vigorously for the issue.⁵

To fully succeed, Lincoln needed to overcome a strategic conundrum and Ashley needed to stand down Democratic opponents in the House. Lincoln wanted both to end the war and end slavery, but one of these might have prevented the other. Focusing attention on a questionable amendment in uncertain times could re-energize the Confederacy and spoil potential peace. Conversely, if the war ended and Southerners returned to Congress, the measure might never pass. Kushner and Spielberg examine these mitigating factors and the uncertainty of the moment to dramatize this lesser-known story for an audience that already knows the ending. In trying to negotiate secretly, Lincoln dictates a message to Confederate leaders to come and

TEACHING SUGGESTIONS

A number of teaching activities could accompany the film *Lincoln* (rated PG-13), which will certainly land in school libraries and teachers' video collections. The 150-minute runtime might make it more practical to show only select scenes, particularly those that shed light on the president and his cabinet, his family, or the debate on the House floor. A host of primary sources—the 1864 Republican and Democrat platforms, Lincoln's speeches, and the House debates on the amendment—are available online and worthy of analysis (see highlighted websites).

An ambitious lesson might require students to compare the re-enacted House scenes with the entries from the *Congressional Globe* that contain the actual speeches and debates. Navigating the Globe's index and pages may be challenging for students, so consider selecting a worthy passage to photocopy. Another option is to compare the Corwin Amendment that protected slavery in 1861 with the Thirteenth Amendment. Finally, students could research a particular congressman or a state's delegation from the era using Congress's online Biographical Directory database. Page 531 of the Globe (38th Congress, 2nd Session) provides the final roll call vote on the amendment.

Digital Primary Sources and Lesson Ideas

Lincoln's Official Site's Learning Hub: <http://dep.disney.go.com/lincoln/>

Includes interactive learning activities and a 28-page PDF file of lesson plans, background content, and primary sources.

Congressional Globe: <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/amlaw/lwcg.html>

The digital *Congressional Globe* includes House speeches and floor debate on the 13th Amendment.

Republican Party Platform, 1856: www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=29621

The party platform included a plank to "forever prohibit the existence of slavery" and additional goals.

Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address: www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=25819

Reenacted in the movie, Lincoln's second inaugural is known for its conciliatory, rebuilding tone.

Abraham Lincoln Papers: <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/alhtml/malhome.html>

Robert Todd Lincoln allowed his father's papers to be opened to the public in 1947, 20 years after the younger Lincoln's own death.

New York Times Digital Archive: www.nytimes.com

This archive allows for searches that can be narrowed by month,

day, and year. Students can trace the ratification process of the Amendment.

Library of Congress's Web Guide to the 1864 Election: www.loc.gov/rr/program/bib/elections/election1864.html

A collection of resources within the Library of Congress relevant to the 1864 election and Lincoln.

Library of Congress's Web Guide to the 13th Amendment: www.loc.gov/rr/program/bib/ourdocs/13thamendment.html

A collection of resources within the Library of Congress relevant to the amendment.

HarpWeek on 13th Amendment: <http://13thamendment.harpweek.com/>

Secondary content, digital images, news reports, and editorials from *Harper's Weekly* 1865.

Abraham Lincoln Association: <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/l/lincoln/>

An 1853 printing of the president's papers available and searchable on the web.

Biographical Directory of the United States Congress: www.bioguide.congress.gov

A searchable database providing a brief resume of anyone who served in Congress.

meet outside the capital at Hampton Roads. "Wait for me," Day-Lewis's character instructs, "do not proceed to Washington."

In the House, Democrat antagonists Fernando Wood (Lee Pace) and George Pendleton (Peter McRobbie) lead the opposition. Some of the movie's best scenes take place in the House chamber (filmed in Virginia's House of Delegates

in Richmond). These scenes reveal party ideology, legislative tactics, and congressional procedures with entertaining exchanges between strong-willed politicians who battle for the soul of the nation. Wood and Pendleton echoed the Northern Democrats' general mantra, "the Union as it was and the Constitution as it is."

An Ethical Path to Passage?

Among this Democratic opposition, however, were some persuadable members, many of whom then lost re-election. This encouraged Republican leaders at the time to hire lobbyists to find the necessary votes, and enabled filmmakers today to shed light on and ridicule a rather ignoble process that achieved a most noble goal. Spielberg casts three

somewhat shady rascals—W.N. Bilbo (James Spader), a Tennessee lawyer and one-time Confederate; Robert Latham (John Hawkes), who helped speculators during the Buchanan administration; and Richard Schell (Tim Blake Nelson) of New York’s powerful Tammany Hall Democrat machine—all actual players enlisted in the effort.⁶ They comfortably indulge in food, drink, and bribery.

About 40 minutes into the film, these pressure boys begin a scramble to deliver the votes. From the House galleries, they target members and plan their strategy. These scenes create a dark comedic, yet thought-provoking look at corruption characteristic of the period. These men bumble around Washington and variously interact with both those who can be bought and those who cannot, accompanied by John Williams’s entertaining score of period music. They constantly dangle political appointments to those members on the fence. In one scene, the lobbyists “accidentally” bump into a House member at a nearby bank, spilling some of his money and much more of theirs. They help the congressman up, and all the money lands in his possession.

The film climaxes with the vote of 119 to 56 with eight members absent. According to the *Congressional Globe*, an outburst of enthusiasm followed for about five minutes. “The Republican side of the House instantly sprang to their feet,” and in the galleries, “male spectators waved their hats and cheered loud and long, while the ladies ... waved their handkerchiefs.”⁷ Eleven representatives who had voted against the measure in June 1864 now voted for it, including five Democrats.

Did Honest Abe cross ethical lines with patronage, bribery, and “a lawyer’s dodge”? Michael Vorenberg, author of *Final Freedom* and the best authority on the amendment’s passage writes emphatically, “There is not one reliable source, nor even an unreliable one, that reports the president made any specific promise in exchange for a vote.” Vorenberg acknowledges that patronage cannot

“Harold Holzer’s sharp, clear writing turns history into drama.”

—*Booklist*

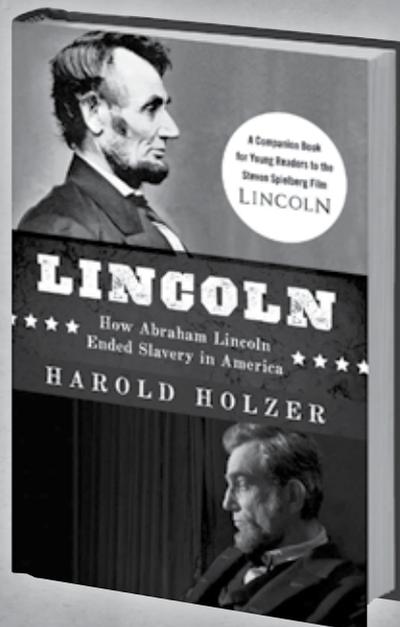
“Holzer’s command of Lincoln—the man, the politician, the orator—is unmatched.”

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Vote in the House of Representatives

June 15, 1864

| Vote | Republicans | Democrats | Unionists/Others | Total |
|---------|-------------|-----------|------------------|-------|
| Yea | 78 | 4 | 11 | 93 |
| Nay | 1 | 58 | 6 | 65 |
| Absent | 6 | 10 | 7 | 23 |
| Abstain | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 |

January 31, 1865

| Vote | Republicans | Democrats | Unionists/Others | Total |
|---------|-------------|-----------|------------------|-------|
| Yea | 86 | 15 | 18 | 119 |
| Nay | 0 | 50 | 6 | 56 |
| Absent | 0 | 8 | 0 | 8 |
| Abstain | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |

Source: *Congressional Globe*, 38TH Congress, 2ND Session, found in Michael Vorenberg, *Final Freedom: The Civil War, the Abolition of Slavery, and the Thirteenth Amendment*, Cambridge, 2001.

be fully ruled out, but he maintains that bribery is even more unlikely. “There’s no evidence of money changing hands,” he says. Also, on the screen, Lincoln visits the lobbyists late one night to assess their progress. Though Secretary Seward and the party employed these liaisons, it is doubtful that the president ever met directly with them. “That didn’t happen,” says Vorenberg, and Lincoln biographer Ronald White agrees. Just before the floor vote, opponents stall in the name of peace over abolition and demand the president confirm or deny rumors that Confederate peace commissioners had travelled to Washington. When asked via messenger, Lincoln, knowing full well an encounter between opposing leaders is in the works beyond the capital responds, “So far as I know, there are no peace commissioners in the city.”⁸

Though there is no direct evidence, it seems highly plausible that political favors and appointments resulted in the deal. Of the targeted House members in *Lincoln*, it appears that only two were real life members: George Yeaman and Alexander Coffroth. Yeaman was a lame duck Unionist from Kentucky who soon after was appointed minister to Denmark. Coffroth, a lifelong Democrat from Pennsylvania, faced a disputed elec-

tion he resolved with help from House Republicans. Both men were solicited in the film and both voted for emancipation in 1865. Other characters were no doubt based on actual members, especially border state representatives who carried the momentum at political cost. Of the 19 border state representatives Ashley met with, 13 voted for the amendment and all paid the price of defeat in their next attempted election.⁹

Conclusion

The film concludes with a strong sense of President Lincoln’s impending doom. Some suggest Spielberg could have skipped the assassination, but it was Lincoln’s murder that broke the deadlock on the amendment in the New York legislature and moved it along in other states. Both Seward and Lincoln’s successor, Andrew Johnson, deserve some credit, but, much like President Kennedy’s assassination assured passage of his civil rights bill, John Wilkes Booth’s bullet essentially guaranteed ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment. This production paints Lincoln with accurate strokes, reminds of his final influence on American abolition, and retells a dubious legislative process that made it possible. Including the president’s fate effectively

raises the question: What if Lincoln had waited until that next Congress? 🌐

Notes

1. For an overview of Lincoln’s image, see Merrill D. Peterson, *Lincoln in American Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); Melvyn Stokes, “Abraham Lincoln and the Movies,” *American Nineteenth Century History* 12, no.2 (June 2011); Tony Piplio, “Hero or Demagogue? Images of Lincoln in American Film,” *Cineaste* (Winter 2009): 15.
2. “Mr. Lincoln Goes to Hollywood,” *Smithsonian* (November 2012); Ronald White interview, “Morning Edition,” National Public Radio (November 22, 2012).
3. Herman Belz, “The Constitution, the Amendment Process, and the Abolition of Slavery,” in *Lincoln and Freedom: Slavery, Emancipation, and the Thirteenth Amendment*, eds. Harold Holzer and Sarah Vaughn Gabbard (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2007), 167; Michael Vorenberg, *Final Freedom: The Civil War, the Abolition of Slavery, and the Thirteenth Amendment* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 54, 55.
4. Ron J. Keller, “‘That Which Congress So Nobly Began’: The Men Who Passed the Thirteenth Amendment Resolution,” in *Lincoln and Freedom: Slavery, Emancipation, and the Thirteenth Amendment*, 198; *Congressional Globe*, 38TH Congress, 2^d. session, Appendix, 1-4.
5. Keller, 197; Vorenberg, 180.
6. Vorenberg, 183.
7. *Congressional Globe*, 38TH Congress, 2ND Session, 531.
8. Vorenberg, *Final Freedom*, 184; Vorenberg interviewed by author, December 13, 2012; Ronald White interview, “Morning Edition,” National Public Radio, November 12, 2012.
9. *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress*, www.bioguide.congress.gov; Vorenberg; Keller, 204.

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