

Native Americans and the Origin of Abraham Lincoln's Views on Race

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December of 1862 was a grisly month of a grisly year. Abraham Lincoln received dire reports from the horrifying battle at Fredricksburg, Virginia, and he had an eye on the scene unfolding on the windswept prairie of Mankato, Minnesota. In that far-flung corner of the nation, the U.S. Army prepared to execute 303 Sioux that had attacked white settlements with “extreme ferocity” the previous August and September. The overwhelming number of souls involved and the jurisprudence of the military required Lincoln to review the evidence personally. He asked Judge Advocate General Joseph Holt if he could delegate this responsibility, but that was out of the question. Lincoln looked at the files and found cause to commute the sentences of 264 individuals, and one of the condemned was granted a reprieve. The other thirty-eight warriors were hanged on December 26 in what was, and remains, simultaneously the largest mass execution and largest act of executive clemency in American history. A mere five days later Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation.¹

The more dramatic consequences of Lincoln's views on African Americans have largely obscured his racial perspective regarding Native Americans. A wealth of literature explores Lincoln's views on race, including important works by Eric Foner, Richard Striner, and Brian Dirck. However, these books acknowledge Native Americans in only a peripheral way. Records show that few slaves or free black persons lived in the communities where Lincoln grew up, and there

1. “Annual Message to Congress,” December 1, 1862, Roy P. Basler et al., eds., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 9 vols. (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1953–55), 5:525; Lincoln to John Pope, November 10, 1862, and Lincoln to Joseph Holt, December 1, 1862, Basler, *Collected Works*, 5:493, 537–38; Richard Striner, *Lincoln and Race* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2012), 65. This article is the product of a research seminar on the Atlantic world offered at Northern Illinois University in the fall of 2014. I acknowledge my warmest gratitude for the guidance of Dr. Aaron Spencer Fogleman and the contributions of the other seminar members as well as Elsa and Dave Anderson, who offered helpful suggestions.

were one or two famous encounters when Lincoln transported goods to New Orleans. However, there are over a dozen documented occasions of contact between Lincoln and Native Americans from 1809 to 1860, including several from his experiences in the Black Hawk War of 1832. Historians know some of these accounts well and frequently include them in narratives of Lincoln's humble beginnings on the frontier. Yet scholars seldom analyze this evidence for the serious contributions these encounters made to Lincoln's developing views on race. Instead, most of the literature has concentrated on Lincoln's treatment of Native Americans during his presidency, as in David Nichols's examination of Lincoln's management of the Indian Bureau. Other works, such as Scott Berg's *38 Nooses*, explore specific events, like the Sioux Uprising.²

An analysis of the encounters between Lincoln and Native Americans from his early life demonstrates that they were formative to his racial ideology in general. These conditions and events contributed to Lincoln's development and led to the decisions he made in the winter of 1862. Examining Lincoln's attitude toward Native Americans in his public speeches and correspondence, as well as the recollections of the men and women who knew him, enhances our understanding of the racial ideology of a man who fundamentally altered the terms of American race relations in the middle of the nineteenth century. Many of the recollections date to the 1860s, after Lincoln became famous. As such, they may carry the biases of that experience. However, they still represent the best (and often only) sources of information about Lincoln's life before his public service began, and they undoubtedly reveal something about the social atmosphere of Lincoln's time and place.

Ultimately, it is clear that Lincoln viewed Native Americans as simultaneously foreign and respectable. Yet the perception of Native Americans as racially foreign is not unique to Lincoln and in many ways reflects the prevailing racial attitudes of socially moderate

2. Eric Foner, *The Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln and American Slavery* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010), 8; Striner, *Lincoln and Race*; Brian Dirck, *Abraham Lincoln and White America* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2012); Brian Dirck, ed., *Lincoln Emancipated: The President and the Politics of Race* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2007); James Lieker, "The Difficulties of Understanding Abe: Lincoln's Reconciliation of Racial Inequality and Natural Rights" in *Lincoln Emancipated*, ed. Brian Dirck, 73–98; David A. Nichols, *Lincoln and the Indians: Civil War Policy and Politics* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1978); David A. Nichols, "The Other Civil War: Lincoln and the Indians" *Minnesota History* 44, no. 1 (Spring 1974): 2–15; Scott W. Berg, *38 Nooses: Lincoln, Little Crow, and the Beginning of the Frontier's End* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2012).

Americans in his time. As historian Sean Harvey explains, the nineteenth century was a time of shifting racial ideologies, when pseudo-scientific explanations of human divergence became more popular. The federal government focused on issues of speech and language and became involved in the collection and interpretation of ethnological material. The new ideology was a departure from earlier theories that had disparaged Amerindians as subhuman. Robert Bieder argues that, by the nineteenth century, the prevailing theories acknowledged Native Americans' shared humanity, yet theorists continued to struggle with how to categorize and explain divergent cultural realities. Most of these emerging explanations applied scientific methods to distinguish categories of human cultural artifacts, such as language, habitations, or clothing. What is compelling about Lincoln is that his contact with Native Americans exhibited some of the intellectual curiosity on which this scientific ethnography was predicated. He was a rapacious student, and his encounters with Native Americans were also characterized by this scholarly appreciation.³

There is evidence of Lincoln encountering Native Americans to varying degrees before, during, and after the Black Hawk War. Although he did not see direct combat, the experience of preparing to fight and kill Native Americans was one of the most obvious moments of Lincoln's developing attitude toward them. Not only did he witness the effects of hostile Indians in northwest Illinois; he also spent leisure time with Native American allies. The functional dichotomy during this engagement elicits some of the complexity of white-native relations in this period. Lincoln's racial perspective regarding Native Americans depended on holding these two aspects in tension; the Indian was simultaneously a foreign, mysterious cultural other and a human being worthy of respect, possessing certain rights. Lincoln negotiated these poles during his formative years, and his relationship with Native Americans informed his broader racial ideology. From his birth into this historical context on the trans-Appalachian frontier to his presidency, Lincoln lived in a triracial society that was more diverse than any black-white binary. These early encounters, and the way Lincoln negotiated temperate, even respectful, relations

3. Robert Bieder, *Science Encounters the Indian: The Early Years of American Ethnology, 1820–1880* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1986); John Wood Sweet, *Bodies Politic: Negotiating Race in the Antebellum North, 1730–1830* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003); Gray H. Whaley, *Oregon and the Collapse of the Illahee: U.S. Empire and the Transformation of an Indigenous World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010); Anne Fabian, *Skull Collectors: Race, Science, and America's Unburied Dead* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

with Native Americans, offer important insights into his later policies regarding nonwhite Americans.

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Any discussion of the role of Native Americans in Lincoln's life must begin with Lincoln's father. Thomas Lincoln witnessed the murder of his own father, also named Abraham. One day in the spring of 1786, while Abraham Lincoln the elder worked in his Kentucky field with his three sons, a Native American attacked and shot him dead. The Indian prepared to abscond with young Thomas when Thomas's older brother Mordecai shot the assailant from a distance and saved his brother's life. This story had a significant impact on the younger Abraham Lincoln. He recounted it on multiple occasions and described it as a stealth attack in an autobiography he wrote for the 1860 campaign. In a letter written to a relative he remarked that this story "is the legend more strongly than [most prominent of] all other imprinted on my mind and memory." In the context of the letter, it appears that he was referring to all the stories relative to his ancestry and not all the stories he had heard in general. Regardless, this tragedy clearly affected him, insofar as it contributed to his understanding of his own origins. The surreptitious nature of the attack and the lack of any context for the violence underscored an appreciation for the tenuous nature of frontier life and the inherent threat of living in close proximity to Native Americans during this period. This threat remained a constant feature of the Lincoln family's psychological and communal life as they moved farther into the trans-Appalachian frontier, from Kentucky to Indiana and Illinois.⁴

Thomas Lincoln surely internalized this fear, and harrowing tales of clashes with Native Americans became part of his conversational relations with community members. Thomas Lincoln Davis Johnston, the son of Abraham Lincoln's stepbrother, recalled Thomas Lincoln's stories later in life. Although few remembered Lincoln's father as a witty man, in the manner of his son Abraham, he reportedly loved company and spending time telling stories. Apparently, Indians were one of Thomas Lincoln's favorite subjects. Johnston again refers to the account of Abraham the elder's murder as being particularly "interesting" and "vivid." It was impressive enough, yet the reference to Thomas's multiple stories reveals that the family did not view this

4. Michael Burlingame, *Abraham Lincoln: A Life* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 1:2; Lincoln to Jesse Lincoln, April 1, 1854, and Lincoln to Jesse W. Fell, Enclosing Autobiography, December 20, 1859, Basler, *Collected Works*, 2:217, 3:511.

relationship with Native Americans as an isolated incident. Rather, the stories functioned in the context of the ongoing struggle for security along the frontier and propagated the broad social divisions between white people and natives. As Lincoln matured, this environment of insecurity would manifest itself in a view of Native Americans as foreign, dangerous, and intriguing.⁵

Lincoln's Uncle Mordecai was also deeply influenced by this traumatic experience. Mordecai harbored a lifelong enmity toward Native Americans that "was ever with him like an avenging spirit." According to one neighbor, Mordecai bragged about killing an Indian who passed through their town in Grayson County, Kentucky, as an act of vengeance for the murder of his father decades earlier. Furthermore, Abraham Lincoln revered his uncle, saw him often, and once said that "Uncle Mord had run off with all the talents of the family." Mordecai apparently had several positive qualities, including a keen intellect and a great sense of humor. His nephew would become renowned for inheriting such attributes. However, Lincoln was probably also exposed to his uncle's venomous racism. Overcoming a favorite uncle's prejudice would certainly present a hurdle as Lincoln's own views developed throughout his life.⁶

As young Abraham Lincoln began his education, he encountered Native Americans again in a more institutionalized social setting. In the foundational biography of Lincoln's early life, Carl Sandburg recounted an example of how the curriculum of frontier education reinforced and challenged social distinctions. "It seemed that Abe made the books tell him more than they told other people," Sandburg suggested. "The other farm boys had gone to school and read *The Kentucky Preceptor*, but Abe picked out such a question as 'Who has the most right to complain, the Indian or the Negro?' and would talk about it, up and down in the cornfields." *The Kentucky Preceptor* was a collection of educational and moralistic literature that included two pieces regarding the evils of slavery—"The Desperate Negro," and "Liberty and Slavery"—but it is difficult to discern Sandburg's

5. Thomas L. D. Johnston (William Herndon Interview), 1866, Douglas L. Wilson and Rodney O. Davis, eds., *Herndon's Informants: Letters, Interviews, and Statements about Abraham Lincoln* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 533.

6. Brian Dirck, *Abraham Lincoln and White America*, 14–15; William Herndon and Jesse Weik, *Herndon's Lincoln*, ed. Douglas L. Wilson and Rodney O. Davis (Galesburg, Ill.: Knox College Lincoln Studies Center; Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 19–20; Lincoln to Jesse Lincoln, April 1, 1854, Basler, *Collected Works*, 2:217; David Herbert Donald, *Lincoln* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 21; Francis F. Browne, *The Everyday Life of Abraham Lincoln* (New York: N. D. Thompson Publishing Co., 1886), 3–4.

source. Elizabeth Crawford, a neighbor of the Lincoln family in Indiana, recalled that the question had been put as the subject of an exhibition or public speaking exercise at school. Whether Lincoln's reflection on this issue was an example of his own critical thinking and intellectual initiative or the result of a more direct assignment may suggest something about Lincoln's individual capacity for empathy. However, he was clearly inspired to consider Native Americans from a new perspective, and Sandburg's account suggests he spent considerable time outside class reflecting on the topic. Whereas the assignment suggested that both the educator and Lincoln considered Indians subjects of pity, they were also being asked to evaluate and defend the rights (or lack thereof) of oppressed communities. Later in life, leading up to and including the Sioux Uprising of 1862, Lincoln continued to advocate for the natural rights of Native Americans. It is unclear how he viewed the issue as a child, but this practice in empathy contributed to a career that would affect the conditions of both groups.⁷

During Lincoln's youth, his direct contact with Native Americans was limited. They occupied abstract roles in his father's stories and school assignments. Dennis Hanks, a live-in relative and close friend of Lincoln, stated quite affirmatively that there were no Indians in Indiana when they moved there in 1816. Although clearly inaccurate, this assertion demonstrates how little exposure the Hanks and Lincoln family had to Native Americans. Comparatively, Eric Foner reveals that, when they left Indiana in 1830, there were also no slaves in Spencer County and only fourteen free black people. A white frontiersman's racial ideas about African Americans were probably very different from his ideas about Native Americans, but as the school assignment illustrates, Anglo-Americans engaged in comparative analysis of groups viewed as racially "other." This limited contact is relevant because it set the stage for Lincoln's later actions in Illinois.⁸

Roughly two years after arriving in Illinois, Lincoln enlisted in the state militia to combat the incursion of Black Hawk, who had crossed the Mississippi River with 368 warriors and over 1,000 Sauk

7. Carl Sandburg, *Abraham Lincoln: "The Prairie Years" and "The War Years,"* 1 vol. (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1954), 14; Elizabeth Crawford to William Henry Herndon, April 19, 1866, Wilson and Davis, *Herndon's Informants*, 245; Robert Bray, *Reading with Lincoln* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2010), 11–15. Bray expands further on the implications of this text for forming Lincoln's opinion on slavery.

8. Dennis Hanks to Herndon, May 4, 1866, Wilson and Davis, *Herndon's Informants*, 251; Foner, *Fiery Trial*, 8.

and Mesquakie. Black Hawk intended to reinhabit land in northwest Illinois that had been sold to the United States in the disputed 1804 Treaty of St. Louis. Here the abstract became acutely real. Thomas Lincoln's horror stories came to life in vivid color, yet many of Lincoln's actions revealed collegiality, empathy, and appreciation for the value of all human life. In Illinois, Lincoln began developing a racial outlook that occupied a middle ground between xenophobia and respect.⁹

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Abraham Lincoln volunteered for a thirty-day tour at Richland Creek near New Salem on April 21, 1832. Lincoln's motivations for enlisting in the Black Hawk War remain unclear, although historians have suggested several hypotheses. Cecil Eby described Lincoln as eagerly volunteering due to the "lure of an Indian purge." Carl Sandburg mentioned the economic motivation of Lincoln's pending unemployment after the inevitable failure of Denton Offutt's (Lincoln's employer's) business. David Donald took a multivariate approach and claimed Lincoln, like most frontier men, was motivated by a combination of patriotism, animosity toward Native Americans, political ambition, and a desire for gainful employment. However, Lloyd Efflandt points out that all white male Illinoisans were required by law to enroll in the militia and failure to register would carry penalties for desertion.¹⁰

Although it is true Lincoln enlisted quickly after the call to arms, there is little evidence he was lusting for an Indian purge, as Eby later acknowledged. Assuredly, the psychological impact of his ancestry, his father's stories, and the general social anxiety regarding hostile natives could have been a factor. However, Lincoln was twenty-three years old when he enlisted, and the previous month he had announced his candidacy for the state legislature from Sangamon County. He was also renowned for his physical prowess after having fought Jack Armstrong in a wrestling match the previous autumn. As a young, healthy man, newly come into the region with aspirations for public

9. Sandburg, *Abraham Lincoln*, 28; John Bowes, *Black Hawk and the War of 1832: Removal in the North* (New York: Chelsea House, 2007), 61. For additional information on the social and political context of the Black Hawk War, see John Hall, *Uncommon Defense: Indian Allies in the Black Hawk War* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009); Patrick J. Jung, *The Black Hawk War of 1832* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2007).

10. Cecil Eby, "That Disgraceful Affair," *the Black Hawk War* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1973), 18; Donald, *Lincoln*, 40–42; Lloyd H. Efflandt, *Lincoln and the Black Hawk War* (Rock Island, Ill.: Rock Island Arsenal Historical Society, 1992), 41.

office, at the outset of the political campaign nonetheless, Lincoln must have seen the potential social benefits of his action. Keeping in mind that military service could have been compelled anyway, any time lost without enlisting could have been a political and social liability. Instead, Lincoln enlisted on his own terms with the combination of motives that Donald described as contributing to his decision.¹¹

The first recorded evidence of Lincoln encountering a Native American in person concerns Lincoln's militia service. After traveling from his home in Sangamon County to the war zone in Henderson County, the militia hosted a band of Cherokee Indians from Iowa that arrived under terms of peace. William Miller, another officer from Sangamon County, described the encounter: "This was the first Indians we saw they was verry friendly and gave us a general war Dance we in return gave them a sucker [Illinois] Ho down all enjoyed the sport and It is safe to say no man enjoyed it better than Capt Lincoln." This cultural exchange reveals some important elements of Lincoln's view of Native Americans upon his first known direct contact with them. Not only did Lincoln approach and interact with the Cherokee, despite the potentially disturbing memory of his grandfather's murder and the possibility of actual combat with the Sauk; he also reportedly enjoyed their company and the exchange immensely. Clearly, he was able to distinguish between different tribes and had enough cultural sensitivity and racial tolerance to enjoy an Indian war dance despite any preconceptions that may have lingered from his youth.¹²

This initial encounter was quickly supplemented with the evidence of horrifying hostilities. On May 15 Lincoln and his company discovered the casualties of the American defeat at Stillman's Run. Lincoln and the other militiamen under General Whitesides were part of the detail tasked with gathering up the casualties. One of Lincoln's neighbors recalled, "The dead was all scalped some with the heads cut off Many with their throats cut and otherwise Barbourously Mutilated of the wounded we found few in number and they hid in the Brush as well as they could." Again, a week later near Ottawa, they encountered a similar massacre that fellow militiaman and neighbor Royal Clary described in detail.¹³

The Indians: they had Killed Davis & Pettigrews family—halls 2 girls gone with them: they were young women. We Saw the Scalps

11. Eby, "That Disgraceful Affair," 107.

12. William Miller[?] (statement for Herndon), [September 1866?], Wilson and Davis, *Herndon's Informants*, 362.

13. *Ibid.*

they had taken—scalps of old women & children. This was near Pottowatomy villiage—faming place. The Indians Scalped an old Grand Mother—Scalped her—hung her scalp on a ram rod—that it might be seen & aggravate the whites—They cut one woman open—hung a child that they had murdered in the womans belly that they had gutted—strong men wept at this—hard hearted men Cried.¹⁴

Lincoln's encounters with the Sauk combatants were limited to this sort of event; the discovery of the consequences of Indian warfare. Lincoln never fought an Indian in live combat, but he was intimately familiar with their style of warfare. As Clary noted, the Indians took steps in order to terrorize or "aggravate" the whites. Given what we know about Lincoln's ancestry and his father's stories, witnessing these scenes firsthand would have made latent insecurities more acute. Lincoln was a strong man, and yet none of these reports characterized him as being "hard hearted," so the effect of these scenes cannot be underestimated. Whites attacked women and children in this campaign as well, but Lincoln's witnessing of the brutality of Indian warfare contributed to his expectations for future Indian violence in the 1860s.

Despite the trauma of these encounters, Lincoln maintained an appreciation for the humanity of individual Native Americans. While Lincoln's unit camped in Henderson County, an Indian named Jack arrived and presented a letter of introduction from U.S. Secretary of War Lewis Cass. His entrance agitated Lincoln's men, and they prepared to lynch the newcomer as a spy. Lincoln's neighbor William G. Greene remembered, "Mr Lincoln in the goodness & kindness and humanity & justice of his nature stood—got between the Indian and the outraged men—saying—'Men this must not be done—he must not be shot and killed by us.' Some of the men remarked—'The Indian is a damned Spy' Still Lincoln stood between the Indian and the vengeance of the outraged soldiers—brave, good & true." The men turned on Lincoln and challenged his bravery, to which Lincoln challenged the men to fight and eventually the soldiers backed down. One observer remarked that this was one of the only times they saw the usually gregarious Lincoln aroused to anger.¹⁵

14. Royal Clary (Herndon interview), [October 1866?], Wilson and Davis, *Herndon's Informants*, 372.

15. William G. Greene to Herndon (interview), May 30, 1865, Clary (Herndon interview), [October 1866?], Greene to Herndon, November 1, 1866, Wilson and Davis, *Herndon's Informants*, 18–19, 372, 390.

At the time, it must have seemed that Lincoln was being overly compassionate or cowardly to advocate for the Indian, as evidenced by the soldiers' initial challenge to Lincoln's bravery. However, in the decades between the occurrence and the time the reports were made to Lincoln's former law partner, William H. Herndon, the witnesses recognized the justice, honor, and bravery in Lincoln's actions. The fact that Lincoln stood alone against a company of angry and armed white men in defense of a single Indian demonstrates something of the regard that he held for individual human life. He might not have been interested in the man as an Indian or as a potential combatant, but he recognized the humanity of the individual despite cultural differences. This attitude conforms to Lincoln's earlier empathy for disadvantaged Native Americans, as well as his later behavior regarding their right to judicial review and legal protection. Despite the horrendous scenes that he witnessed on the blood-soaked battlefields, he harbored an appreciation for the individual as worthy of a modicum of respect, at least enough not to acquiesce to a lynch mob.

After Lincoln's initial thirty-day commitment expired at the end of May, he reenlisted. This time he explicitly stated his economic motivations: "I was out of work," he reportedly told Herndon, "and there being no danger of more fighting, I could do nothing better than enlist again." This is an interesting insight into Lincoln's priorities at this time. He had submitted his name in the run for state legislature the preceding spring, so he was in the midst of a political campaign. Yet, rather than return to Sangamon County, Lincoln remained in northwest Illinois. Although he was politically ambitious, he was also unemployed. This made the economic constraints of campaigning untenable. If Lincoln hoped to impress his constituents, he needed to exhibit some impressive qualities. Commitment to the war effort was one of the few options available to him, and yet he also mentioned the passing danger. He no longer viewed Native Americans as a threat. This reenlistment signals a shift in Lincoln's relationship to Native Americans. The traumatic experience of his father, Lincoln's own testimony to the importance of that story, and the knowledge that Thomas Lincoln enjoyed telling other harrowing tales of Indian violence suggests Lincoln's view of Native Americans prior to this point was, at least, uneasy. However, by the time Lincoln reenlisted with the militia, this unease had passed, and he stated that he did not perceive the Indians as dangerous any longer—at least not dangerous to himself.¹⁶

16. Herndon and Weik, *Herndon's Lincoln*, 73.

On June 20 Lincoln reenlisted again for a tour with Jacob Early's independent spy company, where he would live, work, and play in close quarters with the United States' Indian allies. According to a soldier who served with Lincoln, the ranging group typically camped with General Henry Atkinson's company of regular U.S. army troops as well as "95 Potawatomis a few Winnebagos & Menominees which Indians usually accompanied our company, both in camp and on the move." Some Native Americans, motivated by long-held intertribal competition with the Sauk, allied with the white militiamen. Lincoln apparently spent considerable time and engaged in friendly competition with Indian allies. The soldier George M. Harrison also described some of the recreational activities of life in the camp. Both white soldiers and Indians swam, wrestled, and raced on foot. "In a short race, the white boys generally beat; but a very long race generally, if not always, resulted in favor of the Indians: and so of wrestling, the whites could throw them, but in a very long continued effort the Indians were apt to be victors. Very few men in the army could successfully compete with Mr Lincoln, either in wrestling or swimming." The men also told stories and jokes, and played games like chess, checkers, and cards. Also, "smoking [was] the great pleasure of the Indian." Harrison's recollections of life in the camp offer an important insight into Lincoln's developing view of Native Americans. Far from the stuff of nightmares or pitiful figures in elocution exercises, Lincoln's encounters with living, breathing Indians were actually quite pleasurable. Although life in a nineteenth-century military encampment was not comfortable, the available entertainment was universally enjoyed by both white people and Native Americans; and Lincoln participated.¹⁷

Lincoln's experience at the end of the war, however, was not as peaceful as he had imagined. He encountered at least one more tragic scene of Indian warfare when his company discovered and buried a cadre of soldiers that had been attacked. Early biographer Francis Browne captured Lincoln's detailed description of the scene: "I remember just how those men looked . . . as we rode up the little hill where their camp was. The red light of the morning sun was streaming upon them as they lay, heads toward us, on the ground, and every man had a round, red spot on the top of his head, about as big as a dollar, where the redskins had taken his scalp. It was frightful, but it was grotesque, and the red sunlight seemed to paint everything all over."

17. Burlingame, *Abraham Lincoln*, 1:68. For a discussion on the motives of Indian allies, see Hall, *Uncommon Defense*; George M. Harrison to Herndon, December 20, 1866, and January 29, 1867, Wilson and Davis, *Herndon's Informants*, 520, 554.

Lincoln described the scene as “frightful” but also as “grotesque.” In the 1828 edition of Noah Webster’s dictionary, the term *grotesque* was more closely related to its origins in describing a grotto than it is today. Here Lincoln used it to denote something wild, irregular, or fantastic, yet natural. It was a frightening scene that reminded Lincoln of the danger of combat in general, yet this inclusion of the natural and impressive elements testifies to some acceptance of the danger as a part of the foreign nature of Indian culture. Somewhere between the trauma of the battlefield and participating in the cultural exchange with Indian allies, Lincoln contextualized Native American warfare as but one element of their identity. He now possessed a richer appreciation for Native Americans and their way of life that went beyond horror stories or abstract school assignments. He met Native Americans, played with allies, witnessed the products of the enemy’s warfare, and came away from those experiences enriched with a different racial perspective.¹⁸

Historians often note that Lincoln’s unit did not engage the Sauk or Mesquakie in armed combat, routinely arrived late, and found only the grim aftermath. Lincoln used this fact with his characteristic self-deprecating humor in a speech in the U.S. House of Representatives: “If [Lewis Cass] saw any live, fighting Indians, it was more than I did; but I had a good many bloody struggles with the musketoes; and, although I never fainted from loss of blood, I can truly say I was often very hungry.” This speech was a political defense of Whig presidential candidate Zachary Taylor. Democratic opponents had challenged the Whigs on their lack of principles and accused them of relying on Taylor’s military record for votes. Lincoln observed that the Democrats had, likewise, made a great deal out of Cass’s service in the War of 1812. By comparing his and Cass’s military experience, Lincoln’s principle objective was not to belittle his own service except insofar as it belittled that of Cass. He included other digs apart from the struggle with mosquitoes: Cass bent his sword, Lincoln sat on a musket; Cass picked huckleberries, Lincoln picked wild onions. He concluded by saying that if he was ever nominated for president, he hoped the Democrats would not make fun of him “as they have of Gen: Cass” by characterizing him as a military hero. Lincoln’s discussion of his

18. Francis F. Browne, *The Every-Day Life of Abraham Lincoln* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995 [1886]), 107, cf. “Introduction,” by John Y. Simon for Browne’s method and indispensability; *American Dictionary of the English Language*, comp. Noah Webster (New York: S. Converse, 1828), s.v. “grotesque,” <https://archive.org/stream/americandictionary01websrich#page/852/mode/2up>.

service in the Black Hawk War was not an admission that it was not important to him; rather it was a humorous and political statement crafted to denigrate Cass's military experience. The issue here was not Native Americans nor even the Black Hawk War. On the subject of Lincoln's developing views of Native Americans, the Black Hawk War was clearly a transitional event in his life and in the development of his racial ideology, a time when he shed some of the immaturities of childhood fears and achieved a newfound, mature appreciation for the culture of another group of people, including their leisure activities as well as their capacity for violence and warfare.¹⁹

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After the Black Hawk War, Lincoln began studying law and continued to pursue his political career. He gave public speeches more often, and these speeches were recorded by his listeners and reprinted in local and statewide newspapers. He spoke about matters that were important to his neighbors and constituents, and in the time from the end of the Black Hawk War to his election as president, Lincoln spoke openly about American ideals—making a few observations tangentially related to national Indian policy.²⁰

In an 1838 speech to the Young Men's Lyceum in Springfield, Lincoln described his conception of the foundation of America and the political institutions that sustained liberty. He stated that the United States was in "peaceful possession, of the fairest portion of the earth, as regards extent of territory, fertility of soil, and salubrity of climate." The speech was a prophetic warning that any threat to American stability and prosperity would be endogenous to the United States. He discussed the instability of mob rule in the South and a recent string of lynchings in Mississippi and St. Louis. These mobs started by killing gamblers and transients accused of inciting slave rebellions and ended up killing black slaves and white citizens indiscriminately. It is striking that Native Americans did not figure into Lincoln's concerns for the security of America nor his appreciation for its national origins. He had witnessed and participated in this quest for security a mere six years earlier. He was little more concerned with European

19. Efflandt, *Lincoln and the Black Hawk War*, 45; Donald, *Lincoln*, 45; Burlingame, *Abraham Lincoln*, 1:70; Eby, "That Disgraceful Affair," 196; "Speech in the U.S. House of Representatives on the Presidential Question," July 27, 1848, Basler, *Collected Works*, 1:510.

20. For Lincoln's legal career and move to Springfield see Burlingame, *Abraham Lincoln*, 1:86–256.

nations that might seek to conquer the United States, but at least he mentioned them specifically.²¹

Some insight into this omission can be found in another speech delivered in 1859 to the Phi Alpha Society of Illinois College in Jacksonville. Lincoln described all of the resources that were available to the American people, such as textiles from Europe, buffalo hide from the Rockies, sugar from Louisiana, agricultural goods from the Tropics, whale oil from the Pacific, and others. He also mentioned the railroad and electricity as technologies available for American ingenuity and public service. However, when he discussed the origins of all these resources, Lincoln said, the American "owns a large part of the world, by right of possessing it; and all the rest by right of *wanting* it, and *intending* to have it." Native Americans were implicit in this statement. Lincoln knew that America did not actually possess all of the territories it claimed. Native Americans who lived west of the Mississippi still asserted autonomous control over the regions they inhabited, practically if not nominally. However, he shared the vision of American expansionism that was driven by the social expectations of conquest and possession that informed his era. Although Lincoln opposed the Mexican-American War a decade earlier, he understood the implications of it and the opportunities inherent in the acquisition of the Mexican Cession.²²

Lincoln mentioned Native Americans explicitly in another version of this same speech delivered a year later. He explained that American habits of observation, innovation, and experimentation separated them from natives and Europeans. According to Lincoln, Spaniards, Mexicans, and Native Americans in California had been living and working in a region with rich gold deposits but had never noticed them until American observers probed the area. In Lincoln's view, it was the cultural habits of investigation that led to the discovery of California gold and other western resources that justified American claims to possession of those regions. This outlook conformed to the scientific optimism and racial triumphalism that informed Indian dispossession policies during this period. Native American territorial possession was a foreign, though uninspiring, concept in Lincoln's worldview. He acknowledged the challenge that existed in the

21. "Address before the Young Men's Lyceum of Springfield, Illinois," January 27, 1838, Basler, *Collected Works*, 1:108.

22. "Second Lecture on Discoveries and Inventions," February 11, 1859, Basler, *Collected Works*, 3:357; Amy S. Greenberg, *A Wicked War: Polk, Clay, Lincoln, and the 1846 U.S. Invasion of Mexico* (New York: Vintage Press, 2013).

imposition of American political control, but he was unconcerned by it. Lincoln viewed the Native American presence in the West as a foreign one that would eventually be overcome.²³

The process of overcoming Native American territorial claims was part of Lincoln's political awareness, and although he did not comment on American Indian policy directly, he discussed some of its impact on the American people. In an 1839 speech before the Illinois House of Representatives, Lincoln discussed the Seminole War, Indian removal policies, and the cost of purchasing Indian land in the context of a debate on the Sub-Treasury. Lincoln's opponents claimed money was being not wasted but spent to purchase public lands from Indians. Lincoln asserted that records indicated no land had been purchased but that some money, and less than the expenditures of previous administrations, had been used to develop treaties. Lincoln and the Whigs would have presumably been in favor of the use of public money to acquire additional Indian land. Furthermore, the Democrats argued that a lot of money had been used in the Seminole War in Florida. Lincoln stated that he would have accepted the reasonable expenses of the Florida campaign but the money had been wasted foolishly. Finally, Lincoln's opponents stated the cost of Indian removal west of the Mississippi was substantial. Lincoln said it cost less in 1839 than it did in previous years. He further acknowledged it was a costly enterprise but his issue was that the present administration had not spent much on it recently.²⁴

Lincoln debated the facts pertaining to the economics of U.S. Indian policy in order to question the way the Martin Van Buren administration funded it. He was not arguing against the policies in principle and in fact seemed amenable to the undertakings. His issues were that the money was not being spent responsibly and that not as much was being spent as the Democrats alleged. Lincoln's acceptance of U.S. Indian policy indicated he conformed to the general social attitudes toward Native Americans in his time. He continued to view them as a foreign people that would need to be removed through purchase or conquest. These examples also reflected Lincoln's evolution to a national politician. Whereas previously he had personal or local encounters with Native Americans, by 1839 he considered Native

23. "Lecture on Discoveries, Inventions, and Improvements, Delivered in Neighboring Towns in 1859 and before the Springfield Library Association, Springfield, Illinois," February 22, 1860, John G. Nicolay and John Hay, eds., *Complete Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 12 vols. (New York: Francis D. Tandy Company, 1905), 5:99–113, here 103.

24. "Speech on the Sub-Treasury," December 26, 1839, Basler, *Collected Works*, 1:174–75.

Americans in this broader national perspective. In the context of north-west Illinois, he made the distinction between Sauk and Potawatomi, but this distinction became vague in a national context.

This perspective was also apparent in his statements regarding some of the individuals who were directly responsible for Indian removal. In a eulogy delivered for Zachary Taylor in 1850, Lincoln described Taylor's heroics in the defense of Fort Harrison against a superior Indian war party. Taylor held off the attackers through the night and defeated them in the morning. Later, Taylor led men in the Seminole War and prevailed at the Battle of Okeechobee: "one of the most desperate struggles known to the annals of Indian warfare." Lincoln praised Taylor for his courage in the face of superior numbers, sober judgment, and resolute commitment to victory. Later, in an 1852 speech in Peoria, Lincoln defended Winfield Scott from critics who had called him a fool. Lincoln reminded his audience that Scott was a "noble hearted man and Christian gentleman who as the agent of a democratic administration, removed the Cherokee Indians from their homes to the west of the Mississippi in such a manner as to gain the applause of the great and good of the land."²⁵

Lincoln's early support for the men who enforced government Indian policy coincided with his view of American origins and rights to expansion. He saw Native Americans as a population to be conquered and applauded the efforts of those who contributed to the conquest. However, these statements continued to have a significant political bent. His remarks about Taylor and Scott were both supportive of prominent Whigs. There is no reason to believe that Lincoln did not personally believe in U.S. Indian policies, but Lincoln was a rising politician and his full-throated endorsement of party leaders was expected and unsurprising.

Lincoln made his most definitive prepresidential statements on race during the famous Lincoln-Douglas debates between late August and mid-October of 1858. This series of seven debates between Lincoln, now a Republican, and the incumbent Democrat, Stephen A. Douglas, occurred in a highly contentious run for the U.S. Senate. The year before, the U.S. Supreme Court handed down its decision on the *Dred Scott* case, popular sovereignty was being challenged, and the nation continued to split along sectional divisions. The most pressing national issue was the right of states to determine where slavery

25. "Eulogy on Zachary Taylor," July 25, 1850, Basler, *Collected Works*, 2:83–87, quotation on 84; "Speech at Peoria, Illinois," September 17, 1852, Basler, *Collected Works*, 2:159.

could be practiced. Douglas was a virulent racist and exclaimed that the government was made on the “white basis,” by white men, for the benefit of white men. He favored restricting citizenship to white men of European birth and descent, thereby denying it to “negroes,” “savage Indians,” the Fiji Islanders, the Malaysians, or “any other inferior and degraded race.” By arguing that Lincoln would advocate for racial equality during a time when such an idea was shocking to white Illinoisans, Douglas tried to scare the similarly racist constituency into voting for him. Although his list of supposedly inferior people that included Native Americans was rhetorical and partly sarcastic (African Americans were clearly the primary concern), it opened the door for a discussion of the role of race, power, and equality in America.²⁶

Lincoln refused to take the bait and did not discuss his views of Indians or Pacific Islanders, but he did offer a rebuttal to Douglas’s accusation of Lincoln’s desire for racial equality.

I have no purpose to introduce political and social equality between the white and the black races. There is a physical difference between the two, which in my judgment will probably forever forbid their living together upon the footing of perfect equality, and inasmuch as it becomes a necessity that there must be a difference, I, as well as Judge Douglas, am in favor of the race to which I belong, having the superior position. I have never said anything to the contrary, but I hold that notwithstanding all this, there is no reason in the world why the negro is not entitled to all the natural rights enumerated in the Declaration of Independence, the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.²⁷

Scholars typically read Lincoln’s response to Douglas’s accusation as a way to understand the explicit implications it has for his views toward African Americans. There is no denying that slavery and African Americans were at the heart of Lincoln’s response. However, when one considers the context of Douglas’s accusation and the explicit mention of Native Americans, Lincoln’s response can be seen as part of his general racial perspective. Since Lincoln viewed white and black in such a racial hierarchy, it seems reasonable to suspect he placed Native Americans somewhere on his list as well. Where Native

26. Foner, *Fiery Trial*, 92–104; “First Debate with Stephen A. Douglas at Ottawa, Illinois,” August 21, 1858, “Third Debate with Stephen A. Douglas at Jonesboro, Illinois,” September 15, 1858, and “Seventh and Last Debate with Stephen A. Douglas at Alton, Illinois,” October 15, 1858, Basler, *Collected Works*, 3:9, 113, 296.

27. “First Debate with Stephen A. Douglas,” 3:16.

Americans stood in relation to African Americans in Lincoln's view is not clear and would be an interesting question for further study, but Lincoln clearly rejected Douglas's assertion that he was promoting racial equality. In fact, he said white and black people had fundamental physical differences that prevented them from living together as equals. After being pressed into a political corner, Lincoln acquiesced to the pseudoscientific racism of the period.

However unfortunate this perspective may sound to modern readers, there seems to be a note of regret to Lincoln's words. Instead of saying that the races cannot or should not be equal, he suggested that it is "probably" impossible for them to live together in "perfect equality." Lincoln continued, saying that since it was necessary for there to be a difference, he favored white people occupying the privileged race. If he labored under the assumption that the races could not live together in harmonious equality, he would naturally prefer a position of power and so would his constituents.²⁸

What is most interesting about this statement, however, are not the social relics of Lincoln's period but the idealistic assertion that black people enjoyed all the natural rights of men. They were simultaneously different and worthy of their common humanity, the same as Native Americans. Although Lincoln's views on African Americans is not the subject at hand, it seems his feelings toward African Americans are similar to those this investigation has shown he felt toward Native Americans. The Lincoln-Douglas debates, therefore, should not inform our understanding of Lincoln and Native Americans. Rather, Lincoln's experiences with Native Americans should inform our understanding of the Lincoln-Douglas debates (and all its consequences). Lincoln's racial ideology, and all of the import that would have on American race relations, was informed by the experiences that he had with Native Americans as a child and young man on the trans-Appalachian frontier.

Lincoln's early life on the American frontier put him at the nexus of cultural interaction in the fifty years leading up to the Civil War. Westward expansion and questions related to the perpetuation of slavery were intricately related in this period. This tension is most explicitly visible in the relationship between European Americans, Native Americans, and African Americans. Scholars of Lincoln's life and the multifaceted importance of his life should incorporate his early encounters with Native Americans into any comprehensive investigation of his later actions regarding Indians and African

28. *Ibid.*

Americans. Lincoln lived in and would grow to lead a nation with a diverse racial environment. At least three major racial groups worked, fought, played, lived, and died together in antebellum America. Disregarding the influence of Native Americans on Lincoln's early life and their contributions to his developing racial ideology undermines one of the fundamental characteristics of life in this period.

The events of the Sioux Uprising in 1862 were a reminder of this triracial environment. While black and white soldiers struggled over the future of black and white people in the East, Native Americans continued to struggle for their own future in the West. Lincoln's policies and practices regarding Native Americans as president are beyond the scope of this inquiry. However, the racial ideology that Lincoln developed on the frontier would inform how he later acted toward Native and African Americans. Scholars such as Paul Cohen have previously identified historians' failure to afford Native Americans a significant role in the development of transnational movements in this period. Native Americans, as a prominent component of Lincoln's racial environment, must be included in any comprehensive study of Lincoln's developing views on race, which inform questions of emancipation, dispossession, conquest, and reconciliation. That is not to say that Native Americans were important only insofar as they influenced Lincoln's views on African Americans. Rather, Native Americans molded Lincoln by their own acts and Lincoln's exposure to those actions, which would have important consequences for all people.²⁹

Since Native Americans influenced the formation of Abraham Lincoln's racial ideology, it is clear that Native Americans were active participants in a world that was much more complicated and diverse than a black-white binary. Incorporating Native Americans more fully in an understanding of Lincoln's racial worldview also inspires further exploration of Lincoln's legacy in the Native American community today. As stated above, the executive commutation of Sioux warriors in 1862 was the largest act of clemency in this country, but the fate of those whose sentences were not commuted remains the largest mass execution in American history. This dichotomy contributes to the complexity of Lincoln's legacy for all Americans. Although the influence of Lincoln's presidency on the lives of African and European Americans is substantial and varied, it becomes even richer when viewed in the context of his experiences on the frontier and his early encounters with Native Americans.

29. Paul Cohen, "Was There an Amerindian Atlantic? Reflections on the Limits of a Historiographical Concept," *History of European Ideas*, 34, no. 4 (December 2008): 388–410.