

Jeanne Hoffman. Welcome to the Kosmos online podcast for September 27, 2010. I'm Jeanne Hoffman, and today we're talking with Dr. Phil Magness, adjunct professor at American University, and research coordinator with the Institute for Humane Studies, about his forthcoming book, Colonization After Emancipation: Abraham Lincoln's Emigration Program for Emancipated Slaves. Welcome, thanks for being on our podcast!

Phil Magness. Hi!

JH. So your book tells the story about a little known program, in which Abraham Lincoln attempted to establish colonies in the Caribbean and Central America for the slaves freed by the Emancipation Proclamation. What was this colonization movement about, and how did Lincoln come to support it?

PM. Colonization is an interesting, kind of overlooked facet of American history. It was actually a movement that was born somewhat out of abolitionism, but it wasn't quite as lofty in its ideals as abolitionists. It started actually in the early 1800's, several of our early, prominent founding fathers were active colonizationists, James Madison, Bushrod Washington, who was the nephew of George, John Randolph of Roanoke, they formed an organization in 1818 called the American Colonization Society. And the object of this organization was to take emancipated slaves and resettle them abroad, and it was born out of a somewhat misguided notion that slaves, or black people could never live together with whites in the same country. There would be constant racial strife, and each needed to have its own country. Liberia in Africa is the most prominent example of a colonization experiment. It was actually created by the United States government through the Colonization Society and settled as a home for freed slaves. So there was a pretty long standing existing interest in this colonization movement prior to the Civil War. Lincoln inherited it through the political legacy of his mentor and ideal statesman Henry Clay. Clay had been a past president of the Colonization Society and Lincoln really looked up to Clay and inherited his views on slavery and the future of the black and white races together in the United States from Clay. So, as his career blossomed as a politician, he became a colonizationist, and actually espoused this idea over several times over prior to his presidency.

JH. And how did you become interested in the subject of slavery and emancipation?

PM. I've always had an interest from a classical liberal perspective in the abolitionist movement. Lysander Spooner, William Garrison, Frederick Douglass, were quintessential classical liberals of their time, were very deep thinkers who thought about the future of their country, how slavery was inconsistent with its proclaimed ideals, and how to resolve this almost intractable problem, and they dealt with this over several years. But you also had this strain of, almost conservative, but I wouldn't go so far as to call it abolitionism, but conservative anti-slavery activism in the colonization movement that's more squarely in the conservative side in the approach of what to do with slavery.

JH. And I understand that your conclusion in this book is rather controversial among other historians. So what is your conclusion, and why does it rock the boat?

PM. Right, right. To put it mildly, we're almost throwing a cat into a field of pigeons among Lincoln scholars. The book essentially tells the story of Lincoln's presidency and the colonization programs that

occurred during his presidency, what he pursued as the Civil War played out. Now, historians have known for several years that very early on during his administration Lincoln attempted a couple of schemes at colonization abroad. He actually signed a contract with a business man that attempted to establish a colony in Panama, but it later fell through because the neighboring governments objected to the growing US influence in the region. The more infamous of Lincoln's colonization ventures occurred in an island off the coast of Haiti. It's called Cow Island, or *Ile-a-Vache*. Lincoln basically contracted with the businessman and the Haitian government to ship about 500 freed slaves to establish a temporary experiment in colonization on this island, and the entire project turned out to be a disaster. They had a smallpox epidemic that hit the boat as they were leaving to go over there and by the time they arrived on the island several of the settlers had died on route, the businessman who they contracted with turned out to be a swindler and he took all the money the government gave him and spent it on himself and bought himself almost titles of nobility in Haiti, declared himself governor of the island, and ran it almost like a plantation-style farm, so the settlers were very unhappy, and after a year of pure torment there, the US Navy had to come back and rescue them. Historians have generally been very averse to addressing this area of Lincoln scholarship because it doesn't mesh very well with this notion of Abraham Lincoln the great emancipator, the man who freed the slaves, set us on the track of an egalitarian future. It's a very complex element of his racial beliefs, and it doesn't really mesh well with the whole emancipation story as a continuous progress this end that reaches finality at the end of the Civil War. If you accept the notion that slaves should be resettled abroad, you're implicitly contradicting the idea that there should be a future in the United States itself where multiple races of people can live together in freedom and a general state of equality.

JH. This is the first time I've heard about this side of Abraham Lincoln at all.

PM. It's not taught in the history books very much, especially not the standard biography that everyone learns in high school, the standard version of Abraham Lincoln, the great president. So Lincoln scholars have kind of known about this for a while, they've known about the Haiti experiment and they've known about the Panama experiment, but there's been a strain of scholarship that really tries to tackle this question by explaining when and if Lincoln ever moved away from colonization as a component of his anti-slavery and post-emancipation agenda. So, he's thought of, I guess there are really two conventional theories. One says Abraham Lincoln had a real change of heart on racial issues, and this occurred sometime after the Emancipation Proclamation was signed, January 1, 1863, and this change of heart was brought about by a number of factors. He saw an enlistment of black troops on the Northern side perform on the battlefield and its thought he was greatly moved by this to really come together and view colonization as something that should be abandoned, that maybe there is a more equal future in line for the United States. So, this notion that Lincoln changed his heart, changed his mind, evolved over the course of his presidency from this earlier retrograde inheritance to colonization has been very strong in Lincoln scholarship. The second that some Lincoln biographers have pursued is called, well I like to term it the Lullaby Theory. This is a bit more of a Machiavellian view of Lincoln. It suggests that Lincoln intentionally put out these early colonizationist measures as a ruse to try and convince the public to be more accepting of the Emancipation Proclamation, the idea being that if we free the slaves but also operate with the promise that we're going to relocate them abroad, then a

hesitant public, really appealing to racists, that didn't want the freed slaves to be among them, he's really saying that a hesitant public would be more open to accepting to emancipation. I've actually tackled both of these theories of Lincoln scholarship in the book, and end up pretty much rejecting the Lullaby thesis outright. The evidence for that is, and this is the gist of the story told in the book, we found documentation that there was actually a third venture of colonization that Lincoln undertook and pursued after these earlier two started to experience problems and had fallen through, and he actually begins it right on the heels of the Emancipation Proclamation. Two weeks after he signs the proclamation, Lincoln goes over to the British Embassy in Washington and meets with Lord Lyons, who is a very prim and proper British diplomat who is sent over as minister to the United States. Lyons actually writes in his diary "Mr. Lincoln's coming by again today. I regret that he's coming to talk about his hobby of relocating the slaves abroad." So Lyons had a very skeptical view of this, but Lincoln goes over there and sure enough talks about his hobby. He proposes a plan, says let's enlist in a partnership with the British government acknowledging that Britain has all these colonies across the Caribbean, they have colonies in Jamaica, they have the Bahamas, Barbados, but also some continental colonies. Guiana, the present-day nation of Guiana, was a British sugar plantation colony. And modern day Belize, which also included Honduras at the time, was a mahogany production colony. Belize in particular was viewed as kind of the backwater colony of the British colonial world. Something that all these colonies had in common with each other was they all had labor shortages, massive, massive labor shortages especially as they moved towards a more plantation, large-style model of export agriculture. Sugar production, mahogany production are both very labor intensive, they also wanted to expand into the cotton production trade. The British Empire by this time had abolished slavery, that happened in the 1830's, so they use a free labor system but they need laborers. The idea Lincoln pitches to Lord Lyons is to contract with these individual British colonies to supply them with laborers in freed slaves. To essentially subsidize their transfer down to the colonies, in exchange Britain would enter into a partnership, provide them housing, and provide them land and property, and put them to work as paid laborers on British agricultural products.

JH. That sounds completely contradictory to me, to free people and then contract them to be sent to a specific location.

PM. Yeah, hence the big problem for Lincoln scholars. Now Lincoln, he differed with some colonizationists on this. There were people throughout the United States who supported a very forced sort of deportation of slaves, they said we would no longer tolerate them in our presence, let's move them abroad forcefully. Lincoln always insisted that we need to convince them to undertake these ventures voluntarily, so he was never one to force their hands out of the country. But he was very much interested in encouraging them along to relocate. He actually hired a bureaucratic official, a guy by the name of James Mitchell who figures prominently into this story, to head up a new agency called the US Immigration Bureau that is actually kind of a precursor to the Freedman's Bureau that happened after the war, and Mitchell's job was essentially to coordinate with members of the black community, the free black community, and sell them on this idea of colonization abroad. He does so somewhat successfully, more so than historians acknowledge, because there are actually members of the black abolitionist community, Henry Highland Garnett, a fairly prominent minister up in New York City, what are called

Immigrationists or Repatriationists, and they viewed “if we have this post-slavery society in the United States, things are going to be pretty violent for us, we have seen glimpses of it.” And some extent, Garnett was very prescient on this; he saw what happened in reconstruction, the rise of the Klu Klux Klan, and stuff like that. So Garnett is actually somewhat interested in this, and finding a way for the US government to subsidize the transfer of people abroad to different colonies. So Lincoln and Mitchell really viewed this as an avenue to try and convince the slaves to move abroad. Its controversial for Lincoln scholars because implicit in this Lullaby Theory and this Change of Heart theory is that Lincoln eventually abandoned this idea, and accepted a multiracial future, accepted a more egalitarian concept of what America should look like. The point that’s always cited is the Emancipation Proclamation or shortly thereafter, and we were challenging this essentially by showing that these programs continued for well over a year after the Emancipation Proclamation and may have even continued up until the very last day of Lincoln’s life.

JH. And since people aren’t really talking about this issue, what did you base your research on?

PM. I actually came to this particular topic somewhat by accident. I was researching old Civil War papers down at the Library of Congress in the file of a general by the name of Benjamin F. Butler who is somewhat notorious, was a very politically connected general during the Civil War, fought on the Union side, knew Lincoln, interacted with Lincoln, but also had a reputation as a bit of a scoundrel. He got involved in electoral politics after the war, was governor of Massachusetts, senator and congressman for a period of time, and he kind of had a reputation of being a bit of a swindler, so a controversial fellow in his own right. The paper that I found was a record sitting in his file, and it was a letter that referenced a meeting Butler was invited to at the White House only four days before Lincoln was assassinated. I’m sitting here reviewing all these papers, these old documents, and come across this letter, and its significant because many years after Lincoln was assassinated, when Butler’s in retirement, he wrote a memoir where he claimed that just before the assassination he had been called to the White House to talk about reviving this colonization scheme. And of course, coming right on the date of this invitation sends shockwaves across the Lincoln community, and it has for almost a hundred years since it was first published, since Butler first made the claim. And it challenges this notion that Lincoln ever abandoned colonization if he’s talking about it three days, four days before his death about reviving it as a postwar plan, then it’s really troublesome for Lincoln scholars to accept. So, naturally this anecdote has been controversial for years. But, Butler being kind of a scoundrel in reputation, scholars have been very hesitant to accept his word on this. So finding this letter, this invitation to the White House, was very significant because it proved the meeting occurred. Now we don’t know for certain what was actually said in the meeting other than what Butler repeated forty years later, but the proof that the meeting occurred was huge. That kind of sent me off on this research track to figure out if there was any more truth to it. It resulted in the publication of an article that later led me to stumble across evidence of these contracts being signed with the British government for Belize and Guiana and several locations around the Caribbean.

JH. That’s really significant. Since what you found seems to destroy the current interpretations of Abraham Lincoln, what should our takeaway be of how we should interpret him as an historical figure?

PM. Well, it's a very complex situation that this has presented, because the people who have this boyhood vision of Lincoln, as the rail-splitter, the great emancipator, it's troubling because it makes his racial legacy very complex. I wouldn't go so far as to say that it completely condemns Lincoln because we have to view this chain of events as occurring in Lincoln's own lifetime. It's easy to look back and examine the Civil War or examine the state of race relations in the United States with 100 years of experience in between and all the turmoil that that brought, and conclude that, on very moral terms, that this was wrong. We can view colonization as a retrograde enterprise today, a very misguided enterprise, but in Lincoln's own time, it was definitely a strain of policy that many prominent figures adhered to, Lincoln being one of them. For example, we found a letter dated about three months after Lincoln died where Ulysses S. Grant is talking about a very similar type of scheme as this purported conversation between Lincoln and Butler. So Lincoln was by no means the only person that advocated this. What does it mean for his racial legacy? Well, there's always an historic tendency, especially with a heroic figure, to want the story of their life to reach finality, to have everything neatly wrapped up, Lincoln progressed in his racial thought, from being a colonizationist earlier on to realizing emancipation is the way to go to realizing we should welcome blacks as full citizens of the United States, and he actually did espouse right before his death voting rights for blacks that had been enlisted in the army as soldiers as kind of a thank you gesture to them. So Lincoln was definitely moving and progressing in this thought, he was evolving in his thought, but there's always a quest to say he ended his life, everything wrapped up in finality nice and neat, and he must have rejected colonization and moved on, and therefore we can celebrate his legacy as the perfect emancipator. The argument that I make, and the interpretation that I put forth in the book, is that Lincoln was never really afforded the opportunity to reach that conclusion, the obvious reason that his life was cut short. I am generally of the opinion that Lincoln was very much in flux with his thoughts, very much torn between this old lingering colonizationist idea, and a very timid but certain move towards recognizing greater rights or equal rights for blacks in the United States and hadn't resolved it in his mind, and at the same time was very alarmed and troubled about what the future of the Freed Man is going to be in the United States especially coming straight out of a plantation system and Lincoln was actually somewhat accurate on this because he predicts the rise of the clan, the rise of the Jim Crow Era. One of the earlier events that caused a resurgence in colonization thought in his mind was the New York draft riot of 1863, in which several white residents of the city of New York protested and took to the streets in response to the draft that had been initiated for the war, and very quickly the mob anger turned toward the freed black residents of the city, and they actually lynched several blacks in New York City and it caused a very emotional and trying reaction on Lincoln himself, and we have a recorded conversation that he had with one of his subordinates shortly after that, where he says maybe we should revisit colonization and look at this, I've decided to continue ahead with this plan and engage Great Britain."

JH. Well thank you very much for coming on our podcast to talk with us about this. And if you'd like to learn more about recent books by Classical Liberal scholars, visit kosmosonline.org, connecting the network of liberty-advancing academics, and this is Jeanne Hoffman, signing off.