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BLACK IMAGES OF LINCOLN IN THE AGE OF JIM CROW

by John David Smith

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The years 1890-1920, a period of multifaceted reform which historians label the Progressive Era, was anything but an age of progress for American blacks. Driven by a variety of motives, Progressives instituted such diverse reforms as the direct primary, homogenization of milk, sanitation, conservation, and woman suffrage. But the Progressive movement had little interest in blacks and was notably backward looking on the race issue. As C. Vann Woodward has argued, the movement in the South — where almost 90 percent of American blacks lived — was largely "for whites only." And Northern reformers, too, tended to eliminate blacks from the fruits of reform.[1] A different movement was under way in these years which affected Negroes — one characterized by disfranchisement, legalized segregation, and proscription. The age of reaction in race relations bred an unprecedented increase in lynchings and anti-Negro riots, North and South. From 1885 to 1915 almost 3,000 lynchings of blacks were recorded. Racial hostility was at its peak when in August, 1908, one of the most shameful of the race riots broke out in Springfield, Illinois, a city the nation associated with Abraham Lincoln. Blacks were lynched within a short distance of the Lincoln home and within two miles of the Lincoln tomb. The upheaval left Negro businesses destroyed and black families driven from their homes.[2]

The riot and lynchings at Springfield shocked the national conscience, perhaps moreso because it occurred so close to the centennial of Lincoln's birth. Such mob violence and the general anti-black temper of American society forced blacks to seek ways of advancement either within the narrow sphere allotted them by the whites or by challenging the existing racial status quo. Significantly, many blacks writing in the Progressive Era looked to Lincoln's life in search of ways to combat Jim Crowism. Lincoln's life lent itself to symbolic use because, most black writers argued, it was dedicated to racial equality. Throughout the period Lincoln's imposing character became a silent partner for blacks in their fight against Progressive racism.

Booker T. Washington was the most prominent black leader of the day. He, more than any other Negro author, spread the message which Lincoln's life held for blacks of the Progressive Era. Born a slave in Virginia in 1856, Washington worked his way through Hampton Institute and ultimately became principal of the black vocational school at Tuskegee, Alabama. Washington's long-range goal was the "complete and unqualified integration of the Negro into American society." But he was a realist; he recognized that the level of discrimination against blacks dictated that the race take gradual steps toward reaching its goal. Consequently, he encouraged blacks to make economic independence their first attainment.[3]

In simple, pleasing, Christian terms, Washington placated

From the Louis A. Warren Lincoln Library and Museum

FIGURE 1. Booker T. Washington.

white supremacists and urged blacks to accept the Jim Crow separation of the races as a temporary expedient. With the financial support of Northern philanthropists he transformed the curriculum of Southern schools for blacks. Gradually, an emphasis on vocational training on the Hampton model replaced the classics taught in the Reconstruction period. As an advisor to Presidents Roosevelt and Taft, Washington had special influence on Negro life in the South because he held strong control over patronage for blacks in the region. Even more revealing about his complex personality was Washington's work as a behind-the-scenes activist against anti-Negro legislation and black leaders such as W.E.B. DuBois and William Monroe Trotter who disagreed with his conciliatory racial policy. Washington's thought is difficult to analyze because he "gave a deceptive appearance of freely bowing to Southern demands by repeating much of the white man's propaganda."[4]

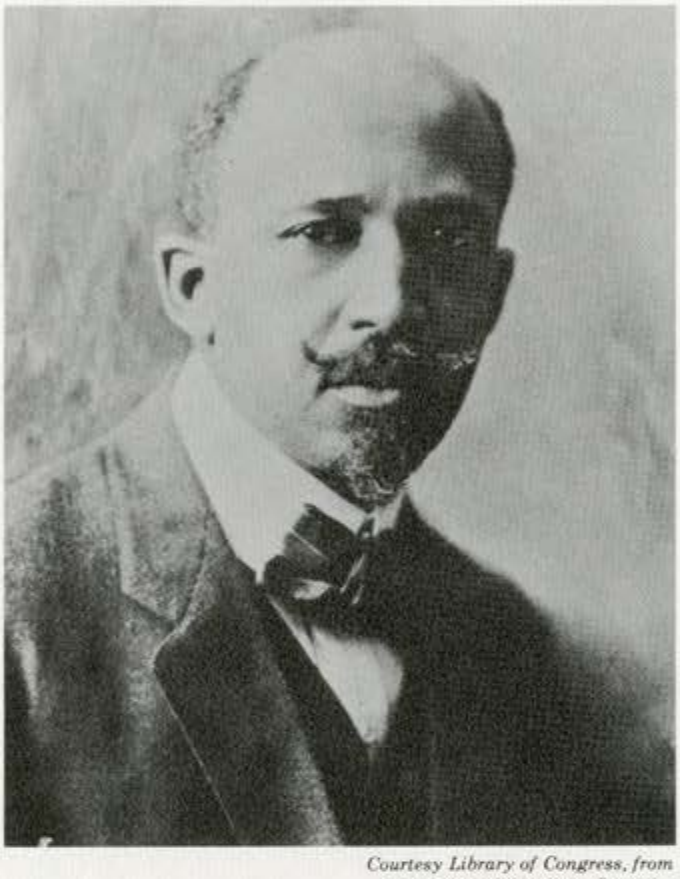
Because he was the most influential American Negro of his age, people listened when Washington spoke. And he spoke often about Abraham Lincoln. On numerous occasions the black leader explained how Lincoln's simplicity and patience, his honesty and determination, offered special messages for Negroes. Washington was keenly sensitive to the use of symbol and imagery in both the printed and spoken word. Lincoln served Washington well in his gospel of self-help and economic advancement — what some contemporary critics denounced as accommodationism.

Washington rated Lincoln a perfect model for blacks. Writing in 1877 to the editor of the *West Virginia Journal*, he cited Lincoln — "who rose from the humble log cabin to the Presidency of the greatest republic on earth" — as an example of the American success story. Like many Southern blacks, Lincoln too was once poor. But he had the courage, resolve, and desire to succeed. Throughout life Lincoln took advantage of things available to him and never despaired at seemingly insurmountable odds.[5] Washington also employed Lincoln in his many talks and lectures. Usually in a preachy, didactic tone, he idealized the Emancipator and drove home his formula for Negro advancement.

Lincoln read the Bible, said Washington, and he urged his students at Tuskegee to "Read your Bibles every day, and you will find how healthily you will grow." Following in Lincoln's footsteps, blacks were to practice self-denial. "This is the secret of Abraham Lincoln's success in life, that great man, . . . sle[pt] on a bed of leaves without any covering in a log cabin. He practised [*sic*] this self-denial, and it gave him an element of strength which won for him the name of the 'first American.'" Honesty, another trait which Washington associated with Lincoln, was a prerequisite for blacks if they too were to advance. Recounting how scrupulous with government money Lincoln was as a postal clerk, Washington asserted that such honesty "helped him along to the presidency."[6]

Between 1896 and 1909 Washington was a frequent speaker at Lincoln Day celebrations before Northern white audiences. Over the years, although the details and examples which he used varied, his message changed little. First, he shocked the audience by informing them that his earliest recollection of Lincoln was as a slave. "Night after night, . . . on an old slave plantation in Virginia, I recall the form of my sainted mother bending over a batch of rags that enveloped my body, on a dirt floor, breathing a fervent prayer to Heaven that 'Marsa Lincoln' might succeed, and that one day she and I might be free." The Tuskegeean, however, sought not to revive sectional animosities. Instead, he emphasized how Lincoln was the saviour of Southern whites as well as blacks. When the slaves were freed, said Washington, Southern whites too were freed "to breathe the air of unfettered freedom; a freedom from dependence on others' labor to the independence of self-labor; . . . to change the Negro from an ignorant man to an intelligent man; [and] to change sympathies that were local and narrow into love and good will for all mankind."[7]

When addressing groups of Northern philanthropists, Washington asked them how they could "help the South and



Courtesy Library of Congress, from Dictionary of American Portraits, Dover Publications, Inc., 1967

FIGURE 2. W.E.B. DuBois.

the Negro in the completion of Lincoln's work?" To achieve "that higher emancipation" — whereby the races would live in true harmony and interdependence — required more and better schools for blacks. When he courted "the active aid and sympathy of every patriotic citizen in the North," the implication was, of course, that Northern dollars invested in Southern black vocational schools like Tuskegee would reap rich benefits for all Americans. Already, he wrote in 1896, blacks had progressed economically and educationally — in the process "proving ourselves worthy of the confidence of our great emancipator." Just as Lincoln emancipated the bondsmen, education now was serving to train blacks in Lincoln's own "habits of thrift, skill, economy and substantial character."[8]

In an age of race-baiting and lynching, Washington counseled blacks not to hate the whites. Like Lincoln, he wrote, the black race must "have the courage to refuse to hate others because it is misunderstood or abused." Virtually advising Negroes not to answer white mobs with force, Washington informed them that "We must remember that no one can degrade us except ourselves, and that if we are worthy no influence can defeat us." The New York *Times* found Washington's tone "remarkable" coming from the leader of a race "recently enslaved and still most unreasonably reviled and despitefully treated." The editor predicted that if Lincoln were still alive he would have welcomed the black leader's sound advice.[9]

In spite of his commitment to nonviolence, Washington did not allow the Springfield lynchings and race riot to pass without comment. Recognizing the tragic irony of such mob rule in Lincoln's own Springfield, he urged upon men of both races the importance of putting into daily practice the lessons of Lincoln's life. Patience and understanding, Washington informed an officer of the Lincoln Centennial Association, could not be virtues of blacks alone but had to be practiced by whites too. Washington then rebuked Springfield's white

community for their lawlessness.

> . . . no man [he argued] who hallows the name of Lincoln will inflict injustice upon the negro because he is a negro or because he is weak. Every act of injustice, or law breaking, growing out of the presence of the negro, seeks to pull down the great temple of justice and law and order which he gave his life to make secure. . . . Just in the degree that both races, . . . exhibit the high qualities of self-control and liberality which Lincoln exhibited in his own life, we will show that in reality we love and honor his name, and both races will be lifted into a high atmosphere of serv[i]ce to each other.[10]

In stark contrast to Washington on almost all matters concerning their race was William Edward Burghardt DuBois. Proud of his free black origins, DuBois was born in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, in 1868. Summarizing his mixed racial background, he claimed to have been born "with a flood of Negro blood, a strain of French, a bit of Dutch, but, thank God! no 'Anglo-Saxon.'" After receiving his Ph.D. in history from Harvard, DuBois went on to become one of America's great black intellectuals. He was a prolific author and a pioneer field researcher in "Negro problems." But it was as a polemicist that DuBois left his mark on Americans, black and white. Denouncing racism in every form, he was an outspoken critic of segregationist practices. In the years after 1903, he became a bitter critic of Washington, who DuBois believed was too conservative, too accommodating to white supremacists. In contrast to Washington, DuBois favored higher education and unqualified equal rights for blacks. Aristocratic, aloof, and arrogant, DuBois demanded respect for Negroes. He never wavered in his battle against what he deemed life under the malignant veil of racism.[11]

Yet curiously, in most of his writings, DuBois differed little with Washington in his judgments of Lincoln. In 1913, for example, he referred to him as "the great man who began the emancipation of the Negro race in America and the emancipation of America itself." Several years earlier, addressing residents of Chicago's Hull House, DuBois urged his listeners to emulate Lincoln in their deeds and thoughts. Describing Lincoln as "a great man, one of the world's greatest men," the black lecturer pointed to three qualities which made him so: his unusual clearness of vision and thought, his ability to grow intellectually, and his patience in all things. DuBois cited Lincoln as the embodiment of American ideals. From humble origins, Lincoln was never impressed with false pretension. Rather, he established his own criterion for what mattered in life. And because he was contemplative, said DuBois, Lincoln's ideas matured as his responsibilities increased. He cited as evidence of this, Lincoln's position on slavery. When elected to the Presidency, Lincoln was anti-slavery — not radical — on the race issue. But, DuBois stressed, as he gave the plight of blacks additional reflection, Lincoln came to adopt abolitionist principles.[12]

In 1922, DuBois struck a markedly different chord when appraising Lincoln. In doing so, DuBois expressed an undercurrent of black thought that, although voiced infrequently, was harshly critical of the Great Emancipator. Writing in *The Crisis,* the organ of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, DuBois described Lincoln as

> . . . a Southern poor white, of illegitimate birth, poorly educated and unusually ugly, awkward, ill-dressed. He liked smutty stories and was a politician down to his toes. Aristocrats . . . despised him, and indeed he had little outwardly that compelled respect. But in that curious human way he was big inside. He had reserves and depths and when habit and convention were torn away there was something left to Lincoln . . . . There was something left, so that at the crisis he was big enough to be inconsistent — cruel, merciful; peace-loving, a fighter; despising Negroes and letting them fight and vote; protecting slavery and freeing slaves. He was a man — a big, inconsistent, brave man.[13]

Not surprisingly, DuBois' words were anathema to Lincolnophiles. A flood of letters poured into *The Crisis* stating displeasure with such blasphemous language. But DuBois was ready for his critics. He urged all disbelievers to check the authenticity of his statements at any library. For those sensitive to his charges of Lincoln's racism he recommended study of the Emancipator's Charleston, Illinois, speech of 1858. It was crucial for blacks, thought DuBois, not to be so uncritical of white heroes like Lincoln. Afro-Americans should search for the truth regarding all men and measures.[14]

DuBois admitted that it would be easier to sanctify, to "whitewash" Lincoln. But then the irony of his life would be lost. "I love him," he wrote "not because he was perfect but because he was not and yet triumphed." According to DuBois, the world contained many Abraham Lincolns — lost souls with seamy backgrounds. Lincoln's life could serve as a model for these persons: ". . . personally I revere him the more because up out of his contradictions and inconsistencies he fought his way to the pinnacles of earth and his fight was within as well as without."[15]

The strain of criticism of Lincoln suggested by DuBois was more fully developed by black lawyer and civil rights activist Archibald H. Grimké. Born a slave in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1849, Grimké was a nephew of the famous Grimké sisters. A graduate of Lincoln University and Harvard Law School, he served as U.S. Consul in Santo Domingo from 1894-1898. Like DuBois, Grimké was an early supporter of Washington's philosophy for Negro advancement but grew dissatisfied and became a leading force in the N.A.A.C.P. In Washington's opinion, Grimké was "a noisy, turbulent and unscrupulous" individual "more bent upon notoriety and keeping up discord than any other motive." An outspoken critic of Jim Crow laws, Grimké testified before Congressional committees on the deleterious effects of segregation and disfranchisement on blacks and whites. A distinguished black historian, he was awarded the N.A.A.C.P.'s Spingarn medal in 1919 — the highest achievement for an Afro-American citizen.[16]

Grimké was very critical of Lincoln, and to idolaters of the Great Emancipator he must have seemed "noisy, turbulent

Courtesy Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University

FIGURE 3. Archibald H. Grimké.

and unscrupulous." What troubled Grimké most about Lincoln was how far short he fell when compared with abolitionist leaders such as Charles Sumner and William Lloyd Garrison. The author of biographies of these men, Grimké chided Lincoln because "At no time before or after his election to the Presidency" was he "a friend of the slaves in the same sense" as were the two Massachusetts abolitionists. "It is the universal vogue now to sing the praises of Mr. Lincoln," wrote Grimké in 1900, "and I too will join heartily and without stint in all merited panegyric upon his greatness." But there were limits to how far he would go.[17]

Grimké accused Lincoln of never holding a strong commitment to abolishing slavery. Rather, he idolized the Constitution — "with all of its slave compromises" — and was dedicated to preserving the Union — "with its shameful inequality and oppression of the blacks." Grimké faulted Lincoln because abolition "was never his life purpose." For Lincoln, charged Grimké, "The right of the slave to freedom had no more practical weight . . . , when set over against the peace or prosperity, or preservation of . . . [the] Union, than would have had, if such a thing was possible, the right to freedom of the imaginary inhabitants of Mars." Grimké found Lincoln especially vulnerable to criticisms of his lethargy in dealing with the problem of slaves entering Federal lines during the Civil War. "He was strangely slow and reluctant to change his policy on this question, strangely averse from abating one jot or tittle of the laws on the national statute book in favor of the masters."[18]

Grimké lamented that the Emancipation Proclamation was inspired by practical considerations, not humanitarian values. Lincoln was not a true friend of human liberty and the Negro race in the spirit of Sumner or Garrison, he said. Grimké urged blacks to revise their opinions of Lincoln: ". . . let us be done, once and forever, with all this literary twaddle and glamour, fiction and myth-making." He asked members of his race to challenge the "wonder-yarns which white men spin of themselves, their deeds and demigods." But his argument went beyond whether Negroes should idolize or criticize Abraham Lincoln. Grimké used his assault on the Sixteenth President as a forum from which to incite Progressive Era blacks to make their own judgments; to assert their own feelings and opinions.

> It seems to me [wrote Grimké] that it is high time for colored Americans to look at Abraham Lincoln from their own standpoint, instead of from that of their white fellow-citizens. We have surely a point of view equally with them for the study of this great man's public life, wherein it touched and influenced our history. Then why are we invariably found in their place on this subject, as on kindred ones, and not in our own? Are we never to find ourselves and our real thought on men and things . . . , for fear of giving offence? Are we to be forever a trite echo, an insignificant "me too" to the white race in America on all sorts of questions . . . ? Is it due to some congenital race weakness, or to environment, to the slave blood which is still abundant in our veins, that we rate instinctively and unconsciously whatever appertains to them as better than the corresponding thing which appertains to ourselves . . . ? Are we never to acquire a sense of proportion and independence of judgment, but must go on with our brains befuddled with the white man's prodigiously magnified opinion of himself and achievements? . . . For if we are ever to occupy a position in America other than that of mere dependents and servile imitators of the whites, we must emancipate ourselves from this species of slavery. . . . With whom then can we more appropriately begin this work of intellectual emancipation than with Abraham Lincoln, the emancipator?[19]

Years before the turn of the century black Americans looked to Abraham Lincoln for inspiration and meaning in life. He was a symbol of hope for the freedmen; his name was a watchword for victory and freedom. Lincoln's image came to have a special significance for blacks in the Progressive Era — the nadir in the history of race relations in America. Racial equality in these years was at best a pipe dream. Lynchings, mob action, disfranchisement — humiliations of all kinds — characterized the reality of black life. It was to Lincoln that blacks again turned in their search for guidance, for an explanation of their proscribed world. The conflicting ideologies of black leaders like Washington, DuBois, and Grimké were mirrored in their interpretations of Lincoln. Washington, ever complex in motive and method, represented the attitudes of most Negro Americans: Lincoln was a Christ-like figure. Surprisingly, DuBois was more favorable in his judgments of Lincoln than might be suspected. Still, he was quick to note Lincoln's inconsistencies, especially his view of colonization as the best method of disposing of the "problem" of the American Negro. Grimké used his criticisms of Lincoln to communicate a broad message to his race: blacks must question and probe. Filiopietism of white leaders would no longer serve the best interests of blacks. For Washington, DuBois, and Grimké, Lincoln's life was filled with lessons — lessons in love, humanity, and realism.

Notes

[1]Woodward, "Progressivism — For Whites Only," *Origins of the New South, 1877-1913* (Baton Rouge, 1967; orig. pub., 1951), pp. 369-395.

[2]William English Walling, "The Race War in the North," *The Independent,* LXV (September 3, 1908), 529-534; James L. Crouthamel, "The Springfield Race Riot of 1908," *Journal of Negro History,* XLV (July, 1960), 164-181.

[3]Samuel R. Spencer, *Booker T. Washington and the Negro's Place in American Life* (Boston, 1955), p. 195.

[4]Claude H. Nolen, *The Negro's Image in the South* (Lexington, 1968), p. 146.

[5]Louis R. Harlan, ed., *The Booker T. Washington Papers* (5 vols.; Urbana, 1972-1976), II, 73.

[6]*Ibid.,* III, 93, 130-131; IV, 514.

[7]Washington, *Address of Booker T. Washington Principal of Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute, Tuskegee, Alabama, Before the Union League Club, Brooklyn, February 12, 1896* [n.p., 1896], pp. 1, 2.

[8]*Ibid.,* pp. 3, 8; Washington, *An Address By Booker T. Washington, Prin., Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute, Tuskegee, Alabama* [n.p., 1898], p. 3; *Address of Booker T. Washington Principal . . . February 12, 1896,* pp. 7, 8.

[9]Washington, "Lincoln and the Black Man," *The Congregationalist and Christian World,* February 6, 1909, p. 176; New York *Times,* February, 13, 1909.

[10]Letter to James R.B. Van Cleave, February 9, 1909, in Springfield (Ill.) *News,* February 13, 1909.

[11]DuBois, *Darkwater: Voices From Within the Veil* (New York, 1969; orig. pub., 1920), p. 9.

[12]DuBois, "Resolutions at Cooper Union on Lincoln's Birthday," *The Crisis,* V (April, 1913), 292; "Abraham Lincoln," *The Voice,* IV (June, 1907), 242, 243.

[13]DuBois in *The Crisis,* XXIV (July, 1922), 103.

[14]DuBois, "Again, Lincoln," *The Crisis,* XXIV (September, 1922), 199-201.

[15]*Ibid.,* pp. 199, 200.

[16]Grimké, "Why Disfranchisement is Bad," *Atlantic Monthly,* XCIV (July, 1904), 72-81; Washington quoted in August Meier, *Negro Thought in America, 1880-1915* (Ann Arbor, 1971; orig. pub., 1963), p. 243; Rayford W. Logan, *The Betrayal of the Negro* (London, 1970; orig. pub., 1954), pp. 364-367.

[17]Grimké, "Charles Sumner," *The American Negro Academy Occasional Papers No. 14* (Washington, 1911), p. 15; "Abraham Lincoln," *Howard's American Magazine,* IV (March, 1900), 353.

[18]Grimké, "Abraham Lincoln," pp. 354, 355.

[19]*Ibid.,* pp. 355, 358, 352-353.