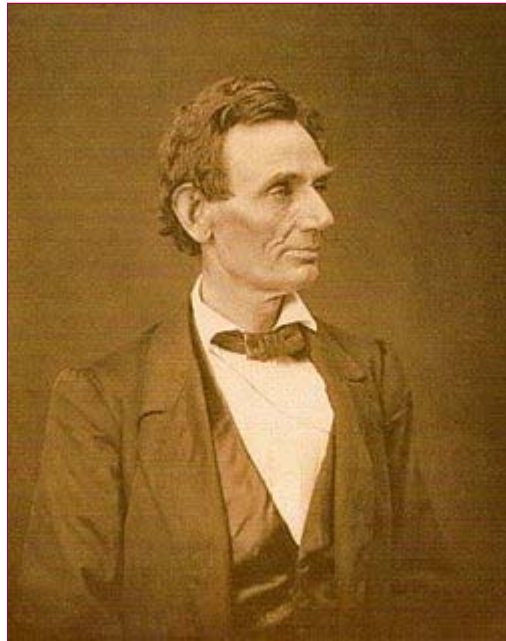


Phil. 324: Topic: Abraham Lincoln's Ethics

Instructor: Professor Thomas Carson

Fall 2008, Tuesday–Thursday 10:00-11:15 am

ABRAHAM LINCOLN is widely regarded as the greatest US President and the most influential person in American history. More has been published about Lincoln than any historical figure, save Jesus Christ. His rise from extreme poverty — and a formal education that lasted less than one year — to become a prominent attorney, President, and one of the greatest masters of English prose, is the stuff of myth. Unlike most other great historical leaders, Lincoln is typically regarded as a singularly good and virtuous human being. Lincoln was "Honest Abe," a man moved by deep compassion and a strong sense of justice to oppose and ultimately abolish slavery. He was a resolute and determined commander-in-chief whose compassion for the immense suffering caused by the American Civil War made him "a man of sorrows." In recent years this assessment of Lincoln has been challenged by a number of scholars who have called him a "racist" and criticized him for not supporting the abolition of slavery until late in the Civil War. Lincoln's personal life has also become the subject of criticism by some scholars. While such scholarship has not become part of the generally accepted interpretation of Lincoln's legacy, it does mark the emergence of a new and more complex process of examination and assessment.



As the bicentenary of his birth approaches in February 2009, it is "altogether fitting and proper" that we should devote attention to Illinois' all-time favorite son. This course will focus on the topics of Lincoln's character and the moral evaluation of his character, the moral assessment of his public and private actions, and the assessment of his own moral views. We will devote particular attention to analyzing some of his most famous speeches and writings — the "House Divided" speech, his debates with Stephen Douglas, the Cooper Union Address, his two inaugural addresses, the Emancipation Proclamation, and his writings on the (im)morality of slavery.

We will begin the course by reading David Herbert Donald's biography of Lincoln. We will read parts of Mill's *Utilitarianism* and Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* to provide the needed philosophical background. Aristotle will help us assess Lincoln's character — his virtues and vices. Mill bears more on his public actions and, in particular, his actions as commander in chief, his commitment to obeying the law (and opposing slavery within the limits set by the law), his political compromises with a strongly anti-abolitionist and deeply racist public opinion — especially in Illinois, and his "expediency" and alleged ruthlessness as a politician. After having read Donald, Aristotle, and Mill, we will be in a position to read and assess William Lee Miller's book, *Lincoln's Virtues: An Ethical Biography*. Miller's assessment of Lincoln's character and public actions (on a whole a very favorable one) will be the point of departure for a series of classroom debates concerning Lincoln's character and actions. Those debates will dominate the last half of the course.

Texts

Abraham Lincoln, *Great Speeches*

David Herbert Donald, *Lincoln*

William Lee Miller, *Lincoln's Virtues: An Ethical Biography*

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*

John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*