

'Lincoln' punts on former president's ambiguous views on race

Written by Javier David

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The opening scene of *Lincoln*, the finely-acted Steven Spielberg Civil War drama about the Great Emancipator, begins with a scene in 1865 where President Abraham Lincoln himself is engaged with a cadre of awe-struck infantrymen, who begin to haltingly recite bits of the Gettysburg Address from memory.

It's Corporal Ira Clarke – a young black soldier who, after regaling Lincoln with the plight of black soldiers, finishes the president's most famous speech word for word.

That poignant scene is one of several in *Lincoln* that function as an impressive bit of cinema magic: it manages to humanize one of American history's most well-known figures and brings to life the aspirations of blacks born as slaves and yearning to be free.

It also highlights two of the film's biggest drawbacks. It depicts Lincoln as a legend without deep exploration of his belief system, and very seldom shows him interacting with the very same people he's trying to free.

Such are the wages of watching a Spielberg production, one of Hollywood's most talented filmmakers, famous and notorious all at once for his treatment of complex historical events. While not quite the masterpiece *Schindler's List* was or as emotionally freighted as *Amistad*,

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Lincoln is an excellent movie that deserves most – if not all – of the breathless press heaped upon it as award season descends upon us.

It's historically accurate, and Daniel Day-Lewis' portrayal of the 16th U.S. president humanizes him, making him heroic without transforming him into a superhero (or for that matter, a vampire slayer).

Yet at the same time, it's hard not to believe Spielberg may have missed an opportunity to shed new light on Lincoln's views on racial comity. A clutch of recent books and articles suggest Honest Abe's beliefs were far more complex than the popular image of the sainted philosopher-ruler who liberated the slaves.

Historians and authors have discovered documents that show Lincoln actually harbored deep doubts about the ability of blacks and whites to live together in harmony. At one point, the Great Emancipator even embraced a plan to resettle freed slaves to parts of the Caribbean and South America before the policy collapsed in acrimony.

It's difficult to reconcile the warring portrait of a stoic emancipator with some public utterances that make him sound like a common Confederate racist, which, granted, was par the course for the time.

Still, there's a legitimate need to explore this part of Lincoln's history without launching what the Los Angeles Times once termed a "full scale assault" on Lincoln's reputation. Spielberg's treatment borders on hagiography and is heavy on piety – at one point Lincoln is called "the purest man in America," as if it were a self-evident truth.

The movie gets burdened at points from an overabundance of speechifying and an emphasis on Congressional arm-twisting and vote-getting. Lincoln himself is depicted as waxing poetic whenever he confronts a problem; meanwhile, the narrative skips gingerly over his familial struggles and touches only tangentially on his relationship with his simmering emotional cauldron of a wife, Mary Todd Lincoln (played skillfully by Sally Field). This aspect of Lincoln's personality is rarely, if ever, mentioned in current literature. It also gives another example of where Spielberg punts on a chance to plumb the depths of a very complex man.

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All of which begs a series of consequential questions that Hollywood and historians should strive to answer (yet, alas, queries that Spielberg ultimately sanitized from his film). If President Lincoln had troubles at home, was he a closet racist as well? Did he, as one author charges, cynically manipulate political discourse and cloak himself in a mantle of racial conciliation, just for the sake of creating a lily-white America?

Using Occam's Razor, it seems implausible that Lincoln would save the village in order to burn it. It ties the mind up in knots just thinking about it. If separation of the races was his true objective, it's improbable that Lincoln would use such extravagant, counter-intuitive and deceptive measures to obscure it — especially because the Republican Party was explicitly founded to abolish the institution of slavery. If indeed he did embrace racial separation as his animus, the sight of so many post-Reconstruction blacks being elected to Congress — as Republicans, no less — would have struck him as a vicious bit of irony.

In truth, Abraham Lincoln's historical beautification is not much different from that of Martin Luther King Jr. As revealed in the decades following his assassination, the civil rights icon had far more foibles than some of his more ardent detractors would care to admit, which included having allegedly plagiarized chunks of his dissertation and being an inveterate womanizer. Popular culture largely seems to omit those parts of his biography.

Although civil rights figures are treated as sacrosanct, the truth is they should be judged by the totality of their records, and not just selectively-edited morsels that contribute to their myths. In a movie like Lincoln, it's better to err on the side of a 'warts and all' portrayal, rather than a simplistic hagiography.

A broad enough body of work in existence does much to challenge the facile notion of the 16th president as a hero of black emancipation. That should not diminish his place in history, nor minimize his accomplishments.

Nearly 150 years later, it's certainly time to shed some daylight on some of Lincoln's darker impulses.