Clarion Review

History

Slavery, America, and Lincoln: The Deal and its Undoing

Clifford L. Johnson
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Five Stars (out of Five)

In *Slavery, America, and Lincoln*, Clifford L. Johnson, an attorney and former law professor, presents a thorough study of the issue of slavery and its stain on American democracy. His research takes his readers back to the origins of the "peculiar institution."

Ancient Greece might be the cradle of democracy, but its society also incorporated the ugly element of human slavery that had a presence in previous societies. "Slavery has existed on virtually every continent and throughout recorded history," Johnson writes. Mayan, Aztecs, Romans: slave societies all. "Trading of slaves was universal. Slaves were captured from areas of large population, such as Africans from 650 AD to 1900 by Arabic slave traders; Slavs from antiquity to 1800; Germanic and Celtic peoples during the Viking era, about 790 to 1100 AD."

Humanity has much to answer for, but Johnson's argument focuses specifically on how America's Founding Fathers were forced to cope with a situation that was the antithesis of their Declaration of Independence. Slavery came to the New World long before the Minutemen fired the shot heard 'round the world, and Jefferson, Adams, and the others were left with a conundrum. The colonies had prospered so much from slavery that in their quest to form a more perfect union, the patriots and idealists were forced to compromise the idea of human liberty.

Johnson's discussion of the post-Rebellion maneuverings to find a way to appease the Southern states-to-be is fascinating and complex. He writes that the "Constitution did not outlaw slavery…Rather, in fact, the existence and legality of slavery was implicitly acknowledged and sanctioned in three separate passages in the Constitution." In fact, the Constitution was carefully written to acknowledge the practice without mentioning the words. For example, in establishing representation apportionment for the House of Representatives, the document notes that the number of delegates "shall be determined by adding to the whole number of free persons, including those bound to service for a term of years, and excluding Indians not taxed, three-

fifths of all other persons." The author writes that "such other persons were slaves in a state."

Johnson goes on to discuss genetics and slavery; the oppression of women, the Dred Scott decision; the Missouri Compromise, the Lincoln-Douglas debates, and Lincoln's Cooper Union speech.

Especially intriguing is Johnson's analysis of Lincoln and the issue of slavery. The author makes a strong case for Lincoln as a Constitutional scholar, one who built an argument that the peculiar institution could be confined to the South. The Great Emancipator believed slavery would die a natural death, but rebellion came instead. Lincoln again sought refuge and authority in the Constitution, using his powers as commander-in-chief to destroy the institution that had shattered the nation.

Although it is fewer than 300 pages in length, Johnson's work weighs heavy in intellectual accomplishment. It is work of erudition, sophistication, and depth. *Slavery, America, and Lincoln* deserves a place in every American history buff's collection.