

# Ebony Editor Calls Lincoln 'Racist' in a New, and Controversial, Study

By Robert Stacy McCain

**Ebony magazine's Lerone Bennett Jr. has written a history of Abraham Lincoln that calls for a reexamination of the racial attitudes of the 16th president of the United States. The 'Great Emancipator,' argues the author, was actually a white supremacist.**

**A**braham Lincoln "was a racist who opposed equal rights for black people, who loved minstrel shows, who used the N-word, who wanted to deport all blacks," according to Lerone Bennett Jr., whose new book, *Forced Into Glory: Abraham Lincoln's White Dream* (Johnson Publishing Co., \$35) examines Lincoln's record. "There has been a systematic attempt to keep the American public from knowing the real Lincoln and the depth of his commitment to white supremacy."

While the book may be shocking to readers accustomed to viewing the nation's 16th president as the "Great Emancipator," Bennett denounces that view as the "Massa Lincoln" myth. "We're dealing with a 135-year-old problem here," says Bennett, executive editor of *Ebony* magazine. "It's one of the most extraordinary efforts I know of to hide a whole man and a whole history, particularly when that man is one of the most celebrated men in American history."

*Forced Into Glory* is creating a stir inside and outside academia. The book is a "full-scale assault on Lincoln's reputation," wrote Eric Foner, a professor of history at Columbia University, in the *Los Angeles Times*. According to *Time* magazine columnist Jack E. White, Bennett's book "rips off the cover" of attempts by historians to hide "the unflattering truth about Lincoln's racist ideals."

Drawing on historical documents, *Forced Into Glory* chronicles Lincoln's racial beliefs and his actions toward blacks and slavery:

- Lincoln publicly referred to blacks by the most offensive racial slur. In one speech, Lincoln said he opposed the expansion of slavery into the territories because he didn't want the West

"to become an asylum for slavery and n-----s."

- Lincoln was, in the words of one friend, "especially fond of Negro minstrel shows," attending blackface performances in Chicago and Washington. At an 1860 performance of Rumsey and Newcomb's *Minstrels*, Lincoln "clapped his great hands, demanding



**'Honest Abe':** Was he a white supremacist?

- Lincoln blamed blacks for the Civil War. "But for your race among us there could not be a war," he said, "although many men engaged on either side do not care for you one way or another."

- Lincoln claimed that Mexicans "are most decidedly a race of mongrels. I understand that there is not more than one person there out of eight who is pure white."

Repeatedly during the course of his career, Lincoln urged that American blacks be sent to Africa or elsewhere. In 1854, he declared his "first impulse would be to free all the slaves and send them to Liberia — to their own native land." In 1860, he called for the "emancipation and deportation" of slaves. In his State of the Union addresses as president, he twice called for the deportation of blacks. In 1865, in the last days of his life, Lincoln said of blacks, "I believe it would be better to export them all to some fertile country with a good climate, which they could have to themselves."

Such facts may not be well-known, but they are "not hidden in the records," says Bennett. "You can't read the Lincoln record without realizing all that." Lincoln became "a secular saint," he argues, partly because of the circumstances of his 1865 assassination, immediately after the Confederate surrender at Appomattox. "Without question, I think the manner of his death, the time of his death ... all these were major factors in turning Lincoln into the American icon."

As a result, historians have hidden much of the truth about that era. "People in the North don't know how deeply involved the North was in slavery," says Bennett, adding that Illinois "had one of the worst black codes in

an encore, louder than anyone" when the minstrels performed "Dixie." Lincoln was also fond of what he called "darker" jokes, Bennett documents.

- Lincoln envisioned and advocated an all-white West, declaring in Alton, Ill., in 1858 that he was "in favor of our new territories being in such a condition that white men may find a home ... as an outlet for free white people everywhere, the world over."

- Lincoln supported his home state's law, passed in 1853, forbidding blacks to move to Illinois. The Illinois Constitution, adopted in 1848, called for laws to "effectually prohibit free persons of color from immigrating to and settling in this state."

America. ... Black people were hunted like beasts of the field on the streets of Chicago, with Lincoln's support."

Indeed, the Emancipation Proclamation did not actually free any slaves. "The most famous act in American history never happened," argues Bennett, noting that Lincoln issued the proclamation only under pressure from radical Republicans in Congress — men such as Thaddeus Stevens of Pennsylvania and Charles Sumner of Massachusetts. Along with abolitionists such as Wendell Phillips and Frederick Douglass, the radicals were "the real emancipators," claims Bennett. "There were several major white leaders [during the Civil War] who are virtually unknown today, who were far in advance of anything Lincoln believed."

Lincoln still has his defenders, of course. In criticizing Bennett's book, syndicated columnist Steve Chapman has said that Lincoln's "racial attitudes evolved as he grew older." Chapman also cited the opinion of Civil War historian James McPherson that if Lincoln had pursued a more vigorous anti-slavery policy, he would have lost support in the North and, ultimately, lost the war against the Confederacy.

In recent years, Lincoln has been criticized most commonly by conservatives who see him as centralizing federal power and trampling on constitutional rights. The late historian M.E. Bradford was denied appointment as chairman of the National Endowment of the Arts in 1981 when his critics, including columnist George Will, drew attention to Bradford's anti-Lincoln writings.

Bennett, 71, first took on the Lincoln myth in 1968, writing an *Ebony* article that caused "a firestorm all across the country," he says. The idea of turning the article into a book was never far from his mind. "But about seven years ago, I started working on it again," he recalls. "I started putting together a group of essays ... and as I read it again, I started adding to it, and it became 600 pages, 700 pages. I had to cut out 200 pages."

It has been worth the effort, says Bennett, to help Americans face the real Lincoln: "The myth is an obstacle to understanding. Lincoln is a metaphor for our real determination to evade the race problem in this country." Historians talk about the problem of reinterpreting Lincoln, but they do so at the end of a 700-page book, in the footnotes. Says Bennett, "Cynics may not believe that the truth will set you free; but lies will definitely enslave you. I don't see any way to get away from the duty to tell the truth." ●

## Law

# War-Crime Defendants Enjoy a Gentle Touch

By Betsy Pisik

**The U.N. detention center in Scheveningen, near The Hague, holds those accused of committing atrocities in the Balkans and Rwanda, who await trial in rather cushy circumstances.**

**A**s hotels go, this one isn't so bad. Each room has a single bed, private bath, built-in shelves and a coffee pot. The window gets plenty of light and some rooms have a view of the sea. There's cable TV, of course.

These 48 nearly identical rooms are not inside a beach resort. They're in a U.N. detention center in Scheveningen, near The Hague, reserved for those accused of some of the most vicious crimes in human history.

Scheveningen is one of two holding centers built by the United Nations in response to world outrage over atrocities committed in the Balkans and Rwanda. The residents, all indicted war criminals, are held in the facilities (sometimes for years) while awaiting trial before the International Criminal Tribunals for the former Yugoslavia and for Rwanda.

The weight room at the Scheveningen facility is well-equipped, and there's an outdoor jogging track. A large common area is spacious enough for family gatherings and features a well-appointed kitchen, card tables and reading areas. There's a medical wing, where guests may see specialists, receive emotional counseling and enjoy a customized physical-therapy regimen. Inmates wear their own clothes and visit privately with their wives. Most of the inmates have laptop computers, but Internet access is forbidden.

Tim McFadden, a genial Irishman who formerly ran a prison in Northern Ireland, bristles when asked if Scheveningen isn't a little too nice. "Innocent until proven guilty," he says. "We must put in place conditions that resemble normal life as much as possible, while at the same time forbidding them to go home at night. My job is to make these men as comfortable as possible." Adds McFadden, "These



**Scheveningen:** Is it a jail or a dorm?

detainees have held high office in public life, very high up, with many privileges attached and they are experiencing the denial of freedom at a later time in life. Many of them feel that what they were doing, or said they were doing, was central to their doing their duty."

The facilities at Scheveningen are subject to U.N. rules and are paid for by U.N. member states. U.N. officials could not provide an estimate of the cost to operate the Dutch facility. But using available figures for 1999 — \$227 per night, or \$82,800 annually per cell, multiplied by 50 cells — yields a figure of more than \$3 million. The other holding center, in Arusha, Tanzania, costs less than half as much — \$98 per day, or \$35,700 annually per cell — because costs such as utilities and salaries are much less in Tanzania, according to Rwandan tribunal spokesman Tom Kennedy.

The United Nations never set out to get a piece of the corrections industry. But when the organization created its landmark war-crimes tribunals in 1993 for the Balkans and in 1994 for Rwanda, it needed a secure place to house the accused during the lengthy trial process. Since then, the United Nations also has found itself operating prisons for garden-variety thieves and murderers in Kosovo and East Timor, both places where the world body has assumed transitional authority. ●