

## **Thinkin' About Lincoln**

### **Dr. Michael Zuckert, Faculty, University of Notre Dame**

**Introduction – Student from Pi Sigma Alpha:** Well, hello. Thank you so much for coming. Welcome to "Thinkin' About Lincoln," which will be presented by Dr. Michael Zuckert from the University of Notre Dame. This event has been put on by Pi Sigma Alpha, this organization to the--well, it's a political science honor society here on campus. Our mission as an organization is to spread the study of political science public history and we're here to do that today. Over 10 years now we have had successful, annual talks for Pi Sigma Alpha. This is, you know, this is part – "Thinkin' About Lincoln." Dr. Zuckert actually returns to Chico. He was here many years ago; I believe it's over 10 years ago that he was presenting here. So we're very happy to have him back. I'd like to thank the History Club and [inaudible], which is a history honor society. They're co-sponsors of this event. Their mission as an organization is somewhat to ours, basically to spread the study of history. And it's very important. It's awesome to see all of you here. If anyone would like to or is interested in joining the History Club you could go to [inaudible] the History Department and ask about their club and how you join. And I'd like to thank most of all the AS funding Allocation Committee, they financed this event. And so we owe--we owe a lot of thanks to them. Right now I'd like to introduce Dr. Alan Gibson, who's also the faculty adviser for Pi Sigma Alpha.

[ Applause ]

**Dr. Alan Gibson:** I'm honored to introduce Professor Michael Zuckert to give the 10th annual Joanna Cowden Lecture for the Political Science Department here at Chico State. As [inaudible] said, Michael was here a decade ago when this lecture series was inaugurated, and it altogether fitting and proper that he should be here for the 10th anniversary lecture. Professor Zuckert is the Nancy Reeves Dreux Professor of Political Science at the University of Notre Dame. He's one of the most thoughtful and accomplished political theorists of his generation. He brings a daunting set of accomplishments with him to CSU, Chico. He has written four books and published over a hundred articles in academic journals. The most striking feature of Professor Zuckert's scholarly research are the range of his contributions and the extraordinary and, I think, unique combination of his historical sensitivity and his philosophical veracity. Michael has made significant contributions within literally every age in the history of political thought, from the ancients to the crypt of modern political thought and literary [inaudible]. Are you interested in the Shakespeare? So is he. Do you specialize in Roman law? He has a lot to teach you. Are you fascinated with the American founding? He is the leading authority. And what's the [inaudible]. Michael enters the history of political thought in areas of scholarship that others have spent a lifetime mapping, and then moves on to redesign a different area. Michael's research, however, has not been in expense of his teaching. In each of the schools that he's taught at in his career, including Notre Dame, he has been recognized as an excellent teacher and in particular for training numerous graduate students who, like him, have changed the direction of political science. As if all of this is not enough, Professor Zuckert is an engaged and accessible public intellectual who cares deeply about improving the quality of discourse in America. In this capacity, he has co-authored and co-produced the public television series, "Mr. Adams and Mr. Jefferson." He had the part of senior scholar for "Liberty," a six-hour public television series on the American Revolution, and for a PBS series on Benjamin Franklin and Alexander

Hamilton. And I found out last night that Michael is one of three advisors -- senior advisers -- for the PBS special, "Constitution USA," with Peter Sagal, that began two nights ago and will be running through the month of May. On a personal note, Michael is one of the true "good guys" of the academy. He likes to tease me about when I was a young buck, just starting out in the profession. He also insures me that I was quiet and I had only dark hair. Over the last 20 years, my hair is grey and my respect and admiration for Michael has only grown. We are fortunate indeed that he is here to start us down in the path of thinking about. Ladies and Gentleman, Michael Zuckert.

[Applause]

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**Dr. Michael Zuckert:** Thank you, Allen. I find the introductions like that a little daunting, they're not easy to live up to, and so please have pity on me if I don't. I don't blame Allen for raising expectations. My title as you've heard now a few times is Thinkin'. "Thinkin'" not "thinking," -- "Thinkin' About Lincoln." And I choose that title not only for its poetic qualities, although I have to say those did appeal to me, but because I think that title sets us on the right track in looking at Lincoln. Because it seems to me that he supplies matter for thinking beyond what any other figure in our American political history has supplied.

Something of why this is so I think comes clear in an essay that another one of our presidents, Woodrow Wilson, once wrote when he wrote on the 100th anniversary of Lincoln's birth. And in that essay he asked his audience, he said, "Have you ever looked at some of those singular statues of the great French sculptor Rodin--those pieces of marble in which only some part of a figure is revealed and the rest is left in the hidden lines of the marble itself. Here, there emerges the arm and the bust and the eager face, but the body disappears in the general bulk of the stone, and the lines fall off vaguely." These sculptures reminded Wilson of Lincoln, as he said, "There was a little disclosed of him, but not all. You feel that more remained unrevealed than was disclosed to our view. He is like some great reservoir of living water which you can freely quaff but can never exhaust."

Now my own sense of Lincoln is very much like this. The more we come to understand, the more there seems yet left to be understood. One is never sure that one has seen to the bottom of him; indeed, if anything, one is pretty sure that one hasn't. Yet, it seems to me that we are not thinking about Lincoln quite as much as we used to, neither thinking as much about him nor thinking as well of him either. I mean by the first claim that we don't--not merely that we don't think of him as often but also that we don't think of him as well. And I mean by the second claim, not only that we don't think as highly of him but that we don't think as wisely or well, I'd say thoughtfully, as Americans once did. In the same essay that I quoted from just before, Woodrow Wilson said this, "It is not necessary that I should rehearse for you the life of Abraham Lincoln. It has been written in every school book. It has been rehearsed in every family. It were to impeach your intelligence to tell you the story of his life. Today, I doubt we can say what Wilson said, that Lincoln's life is" rehearsed in every family." And while he still does appear in school books, it is not in quite so positive a way as in Wilson's day. Of course, Lincoln has not fallen to the level say of Jimmy Carter or Herbert Hoover, in the estimate of the American people. It is rather that we have a profoundly ambiguous relation to him. He still does receive great honor as -- there was a recent movie about him, some of you may have heard of. So, for example, in the polls that are taking by

historians of the great Presidents, he still ranks very high in those polls. Nonetheless, I think that we need to note that these are polls of presidency scholars, and their criteria of judgment tend to be according to how well the president has used the powers of the presidency, that is, a rather narrow set of criteria for judging a man.

Instead it seems to be that now certain reservations have opened up about Lincoln and in some cases very serious ones. And I want to first before I go further mention what those reservations are, or some of them. It seems to me that there had been two major waves of reconsideration of Lincoln, reassessments of Lincoln, corresponding roughly to the two halves of the 20th century. The first reassessment was sponsored by some of the great historians of the Civil War. They came to reconsider Lincoln's statecraft, especially as he practiced it in the pre-Civil War period. Their criticism of Lincoln goes something like this. He took an overtly radical and overly moralistic position in the pre-war period, and together with some people even to his extreme left, people like the Abolitionists, and some of his Republican party allies, he transformed a conflict that could have been compromised and could have been settled in a peaceful way and he made it into a war with all the marks of a great tragedy. The Civil War, these are--these historians argue, was not inevitable in itself but Lincoln and his friends made it so by their intransigence. Lincoln had famously said, "A house divided against itself cannot stand. I believe this government cannot endure permanently half-slave and half free."

Now these historians believe that Lincoln, by pronouncing and acting on the principles of his "house divided" speech, created the situation and the climate of opinion in which the entire South could do nothing but see his election as a declaration of war against them and their institutions. And thus that Lincoln gave them no choice but to leave the Union. At the same time, Lincoln insisted that he, as he said, he did not expect the Union to be dissolved. He did not expect the house to fall but he did expect "it will cease to be divided." Now what Lincoln stated as a mere prediction was for him an imperative of policy. The now unstoppable force of Lincoln-inspired southern fear met the immovable object of Lincolnian resolve to maintain the Union. Once the issue was defined that way the result was as inevitable as Oedipus killing his father. That result was Civil War. Now this line of argument about the Civil War and Lincoln became powerful during the first half the 20th century, and was associated with a national reassessment of the end result of that war. The segregation system had replaced slavery in the south, while Northern opinion lost all zeal for any sort of civil rights agenda. It lost all zeal for remaking southern society or for attending to sectionally divisive issues which might get in the way of the amazing economic development that was occurring in these years. Reading backwards from the national accommodation to the peculiar racial patterns in the south, Americans begin to wonder whether the Civil War, which up until World War I had been the most destructive war in human history - - Americans began to wonder whether that war had been worth it. The historians breathing in the spirit of this age redefined the war as preventable, with Lincoln and the evolutionist as the chief villains in snatching war from the jaws of peace.

Now historians varied a good deal in the motivations they attributed to Lincoln in taking the actions that he did. Some thought it was just a matter of poor judgment. For example that he didn't understand the real dynamics of slavery expansion, or that he didn't understand what kind of war it would actually be.

At the outbreak of fighting for example, Lincoln called for 75,000 volunteers to serve for three months. Now to put those numbers in some kind of perspective, let me just remind you that the civil war left nearly 620,000 dead on both sides of the war and it was--it took four years to complete. Others see the episode even less favorably to Lincoln. One very famous essay, "Abraham Lincoln and the Self-Made Myth," attributed all of Lincoln's action to nothing so much as his soaring personal ambition. He was willing to risk all, to risk the future of his country and the lives of his countrymen, so that he might hold high office."

Now, ironically, the charges raised against Lincoln in the second half of the 20th century are more or less opposite to those that were raised in the first half. Not Lincoln's intransigence, but about his half-heartedness, the narrowness of his motives, the actions and views, the deep conservatism of all that he did and thought. These are the things that the newer critics find to blame. This line of thought about Lincoln emerged in the wake of the Civil Rights movement. Lincoln, these critics want to say, may have signed the document that freed the slaves, but he did not much like black people, he did not want to free slaves, he favored the interests of whites only, and he did not see America as a place for whites and blacks to live together peacefully. In the final analysis these charges amount to the dread accusations of racism, conservatism -- after all revered the work of "the fathers" if you remember the Gettysburg address -- and pro-capitalism. He frequently spoke of the virtues of free markets.

Now these two charges against Lincoln together are very serious. On the one hand, Lincoln is held to be drastically deficient in his state-craft, that is politically deficient. In the other case, he is held to be morally deficient. Together, they surely help account for why we are not thinkin' about Lincoln either so often or so highly as Americans once did. Now my task this afternoon is not merely to speculate on the relative decline in Lincoln's cosmic "approval rating" but to rather to think a bit about him, partly to defend him, partly merely to ruminate over him in what he was.

I'd like to deal with the various charges against him in terms of this focusing question: Was Lincoln right or was Stephen A. Douglas right in the great debate that they had? That debate concerned a very simple question: What should national policy be with respect to the presence or absence of slavery in the territories -- not yet states -- those territories that belonged to the United States? Before I discuss this, let me interject here just a brief editorial comment. Read these debates. I don't know if your faculty assigned them to you but I hope they do sometime or some parts of them anyway. These debates can show you what democratic politics in America was once capable of. Two candidates, traveling the length of the state of Illinois, speaking on topics that they, not a panel of newspaper reporters, thought important. Speaking at length, speaking with humanity, with logic, with cutting sarcasm often and with obtrusive civility in speeches jammed with information, with history, with explanations of alternative policies, with deep going reflections about morally and political right. That's what the Lincoln-Douglas debates were. Here was an election in which the candidates treated their half educated electorate. People who turned out in droves and sat on grass -- who sat for three or four or five hours for the debate. And the candidates treated them as intelligent, informed or at least capable of being informed, and capable of judging for themselves about the most important issues facing them as citizens. I'm not

going to pause to make the obvious comparison to the electioneering of candidates or the electorate in our time.

In these debates each one of them, Lincoln and Douglas stood for one policy. Douglas stood for the policy of territorial self-determination, or popular sovereignty. Lincoln stood for the prohibition of slavery in the territories, at least in those territories which were north of the old Missouri Compromise line. Now Douglas' policy of popular sovereignty was, I have to say, a brilliant solution to an intractable problem of politics both high and low. The policy itself was very simple. Instead of Congress deciding whether slavery would or would not be allowed to exist in the territories, as had been the approach taken since at least the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, quite a long time, Douglas proposed instead that the people of each territory should be allowed to decide this question for themselves. Now this issue was especially important, because if slavery were allowed into the territories, that area would almost inevitably -- in fact inevitably, I go so far to say inevitably -- come into the Union as a slave state, and if it were not allowed, it would come in a free state.

Now, given the way representation in the Senate works, and the role of Senatorial representation in the Electoral College, the relative number of free and slave states was a matter of central importance to all sections of the nation. Therefore, the strongest political passions were brought to bear on Congress in its attempts to deal with these territories. All of national politics got caught up in the sectional conflict and it was explosive.

Now Douglas' solution was elegant. The principle of America, he said, is self-government; therefore, let the people of each territory govern themselves, let them decide for themselves. Why should Washington dictate a solution? That sound familiar? Douglas thought that he had found a way to settle what appeared to be a union-threatening conflict. The center of conflict would no longer be Washington, but would be on the local territories themselves. The question of whether to allow slavery in any given territory would no longer involve the whole Congress and the presidency. It was a masterful effort to deflect conflict from the center and put it in the periphery.

Douglas' policy managed to avoid what was becoming the most contentious element of the conflict, moreover. Because for Congress to make a--for Congress to make a pronouncement on this subject amounted to a national endorsement of the principles and institutions of one or the other section of the country, and an implicit rejection of the principles and institutions of the other section. Since Congress had forbidden slavery in the past, the Southerners felt as though their special institutions and values were being dis-valued by the nation. The South felt slighted and demanded that its institutions be recognized as equally valuable. Now Douglas' popular sovereignty policy gave the South at least some of what it wanted--if not national endorsement of slavery, then at least a cessation of the implicit national condemnation of slavery. Under Douglas' popular sovereignty policy, the federal government then would remain strictly neutral between Northern principles of freedom and Southern principles of slavery. As Douglas said when he was out campaigning, he didn't care whether slavery was voted up or voted down, just that it be voted on.

But Douglas was actually not so neutral towards slavery as these public statements imply, personally neutral. He did not particularly wish to see slavery spread, and he thought that his policy would not in fact lead to that result. He believed that slavery took root or did not, not because of laws but because of physical conditions. Some climates and the resulting agricultural systems are suited to slavery and other climates are not. Nature, he thought, not law would decide where slavery would go, and thus the divisive political battles could be avoided in a way that made no difference to the ultimate outcomes. Now Douglas' position as I hope you can see was a statesmanly position. It aimed to promote political peace and harmony, and to avoid both the Scylla of disunion and the Charybdis of civil war. No wonder some historians came to condemn Lincoln for intransigently framing the issue in such a way as to prevent Douglas' pacific and apparently humane policy from succeeding.

Now thinkin' about Lincoln, thinkin' well about Lincoln, that is to say, thinking deeply and honestly about Lincoln, requires facing up to the challenge of Douglas. Now it must be said at the outset that Lincoln did do everything in his power to prevent the country from adopting Douglas' policy of popular sovereignty. He had dropped out of politics in 1850 after one term in Congress. He had turned his attention more seriously to his legal practice, which was becoming very, very profitable -- he became a big railroad lawyer -- and seemed resolved after 1850 to make his life outside of politics. But his plans changed in 1854, when the Kansas-Nebraska Act made Douglas' popular sovereignty approach the law of the land, in place of the Missouri Compromise policy of prohibiting slavery outright in the territories. Lincoln's change of direction was remarkable. He started to research the history of the slavery question in America and turned back to politics -- not, as before, oriented around small-time electioneering, but dedicated to one object and one object only: to show the perniciousness of the Douglas policy and the corresponding propriety of the restoration of the Missouri Compromise. Lincoln insisted that the question of substantive principle, the question of the inherent right or wrong of slavery, could not be pushed aside in favor of the procedural solution of popular sovereignty.

Now this may seem to be obviously the right answer, but we can't rest so easy with it. Conceding that Lincoln is correct about the moral evil of slavery, it is still a fact that he was not about to change the minds of the slave-holders or their allies. Moreover, he was far from an abolitionist himself. He conceded that, despite the moral wrong of slavery, only the states where it existed had any power to do anything about it. And he knew that they were not about to abolish slavery any time soon. It is not at all clear, then, that any good could follow from Lincoln's policy, but it certainly was clear to Douglas at least that much political evil could follow--that evil being an intensified return to the political conflict preceding 1854. Lincoln's position, in other words, looked to be quite irresponsible.

Now in 1854 Lincoln explained very lucidly why he left his lucrative law practice and took it upon himself to speak out against the leading politician in Illinois, and really one of the leading politicians in the nation. It was because, he said, "I hate this declared indifference to the spread of slavery." Hatred. This is a strong sentiment from a man who, at the end of the Civil War, a war filled with hatred, preached "malice toward none, and charity toward all." Lincoln hated the Douglas policy of indifference to slavery and he came out of retirement to voice that hatred, and to try to make others feel it also. Here's what he said, "I hate it because of the monstrous injustice of slavery itself. I hate it because it deprives our

republican example of its just influence in the world. And especially I hate it because it forces so many good men amongst ourselves into an open war with the very fundamental principle of civil liberty-- criticizing the Declaration of Independence, and insisting there is no right principle of action but self-interest."

So Lincoln hates Douglas' approach because of its effects on three different groups: first, the slaves themselves as victims of this monstrous, enormous injustice of slavery; second, its effects on those foreigners who are enemies to America and to American republicanism, and who are heartened by the existence of slavery in the midst of freedom, for this proves to them the hypocrisy of the Americans. As Samuel Johnson, the British writer, said at the time of the American Revolution, "How is it that we hear the loudest yelps for liberty among the drivers of Negroes?" And third and finally, Lincoln hates the effect on many good men amongst ourselves because it leads them into opposition to the Declaration of Independence and the principles of political right.

Perhaps surprisingly, Lincoln identified this last as his most "especial" ground for hating the principle of indifference or neutrality about slavery. Now Lincoln was definitely onto something when he saw slavery as turning many, many Americans against the Declaration of Independence. Senator Pettit from my current home state of Indiana, in 1854 on the floor of the Senate called the Declaration of Independence a "self-evident lie." From Lincoln's point of view, perhaps the most discouraging sign of the war slavery provoked against the Declaration of Independence was the decision by the U.S. Supreme Court in the notorious case of Dred Scott. In that case the Chief Justice of the United States said that the Declaration of Independence did not possibly, could not possibly, have been meant to apply to members of the African race, who he concluded and this is a correct quotation, "Had no rights which the white man was bound to respect." This is the fulfillment to a tee of what Lincoln had feared three years earlier in 1854 -- that good men would reject the very principles of political right and instead insist that there is no right principle of action but self-interest.

Now all three of Lincoln's points end up being variants of his first point -- that is, that Douglas' policy ignores the monstrous injustice of slavery. It is this injustice that robs American institutions of the power of example and that threatens to rob America of its own commitment to right principles of political action. Lincoln's point here is a bit more subtle than it seems. It is not slavery itself that does these bad things so much as Douglas' approach to slavery; that is, the declaration of official indifference to its rightness or wrongness. Lincoln thought slavery a monstrous injustice, but he thought it would have to be lived with for the time being, and that it could be so long as the prohibition on the spread of slavery remained in the law to serve two, as he saw them, crucial functions. First, it would affirm the inherent wrong of slavery by not being neutral about it; and second, it would give the public mind reason to believe that slavery was "in course of ultimate extinction" -- that somehow, someday it would go. In that second wave of criticism after the start of the civil rights movement, Lincoln was blamed for being so tolerant of slavery as this, blamed for opposing intransigently and immediately not the evil itself but the peripheral matter of the spread of the evil, all the while affirming his willingness to tolerate it where it existed. So Lincoln, apparently, hated Douglas' stated indifference about slavery more than he hated slavery itself. Now we can understand his reasons for opposing Douglas' effort at a statesmanly

settlement, as well as, his reasons for not going further in an abolitionist direction only by listening to what he says about the monstrous injustice of slavery itself.

His central argument against slavery is a very simple syllogism. So bear with me, I'll give you the--a syllogism, so it means keeping the steps straight. It's a simple one. The first premise is this, has--very persuasive formatting. All human beings are equal or all possess equal rights, or all possess a right to themselves. Those are all the three ways of stating the first premise. Yes. Premise 2: Blacks are human beings. Conclusion: Therefore, slavery of the blacks, or of that matter, any human being is unjust, because it is a denial of rights, a denial of this right of self-possession that he mentions. If you can see Lincoln was no relativist that is clear. He did not believe that it was merely his value of judgment that slavery was wrong--rather, he insisted, it is wrong, and a decent political society will recognize that to be so. But Lincoln also knew that not everyone accepted his syllogism. In particular, the first premise, the one about, human equality or human rights or human self-possession, in particular that first premise had become very controversial in his time.

So what is Lincoln's argument in favor of his first premise? Actually he made three chief arguments in favor of their premise. The first one was this -- and this was probably the most common one that he voiced during his political career. It was an argument from feeling. This is what he told his audience in 1854, "Your sense of justice and human sympathy continually tell you that the poor Negro has some natural right to himself." Later on he says, "Repeal the Missouri Compromise--repeal all compromises--repeal the Declaration of Independence--repeal all past history. You still cannot repeal human nature. It still will be the abundance of man's heart, that slavery extension is wrong." Another place he said, "It is certain that the great mass of mankind consider slavery a great moral wrong; and their feeling against it, is not evanescent, but eternal. It lies at the very foundation of their sense of justice." Nature, expressed in the universal or near universal promptings of the human heart, it's nature that teaches that human beings are equal and that slavery is an abomination.

But nature is not the only source of this knowledge for Lincoln. He also said in many places, he spoke like this, "My ancient faith teaches me that all men are created equal and that there can be no moral right in connection with one man's making a slave of another." By his "ancient faith" Lincoln means, of course, the Declaration of Independence. That is a statement not universally known and delivered by the human heart in the natural feelings, but rather a proposition put forward in a specifically American document. It is Lincoln's or perhaps our faith, not the faith of mankind in general, where Lincoln's first argument appeals to universal nature, his second appeals to history, to a particular deliverance of our, our American history. These two arguments, perhaps not contradictory to each other, are nevertheless quite different

Now to these two arguments Lincoln added a third, and this is very different from the other two. Where the others are in one form or another sub-rational, this one is rational. This one is an argument of reason. And here's Lincoln's argument, again, very simple, stated in Lincoln's only way: "If person A can prove, however conclusively, that he may, of right, enslave B. Why may not B snatch the same argument, and prove equally that he may enslave A? You say A is white and B is black. Oh it is color,

then; the lighter having the right to enslave the darker? Take care. By this rule, you are to be slave to the first man you meet, with a fairer skin than your own. Oh you do not mean color exactly?--You mean that whites are intellectually the superior of the blacks, and, therefore have the right to enslave them? Take care again. By this rule, you are to be slave to the first man you meet with an intellect superior to your own. But, say you, it is a question of interest; and if you can make it your interest, you have the right to enslave another. Very well, and if he can make it his interest, he has the right to enslave you."

Now this is in a way a very simple argument, yet it is also, at least in my opinion, a very powerful argument. It is what is known in contemporary moral and political philosophy as an "agent relative argument." You see Lincoln was thinking very fancily even though he didn't know it. His argument begins with a claim that I, that is each and every I, raise for myself. I know, I feel in my bones my own claim to freedom. I know I feel that I am free and want to be free. I cannot help but see this and assert this claim for myself. And Lincoln's reasoning makes me see that I cannot go on to affirm the enslaving of another without endangering in principle my own freedom. As Lincoln said in another place, "Although volume upon volume is written to prove slavery a very good thing, we never hear of the man who wishes to take the good of it, by being a slave himself." Or, put even more simply, Lincoln once said, "As I would not be a slave, so I would not be a master."

Now you may have noticed that this argument, too, contains an important premise rooted in feeling and in this respect it's a little bit like Lincoln's first argument but there is an important difference between this argument and the first argument. In the first argument, the so-called universal feeling is a direct revulsion against slavery for others; in this third argument, it is a direct revulsion against slavery for oneself. Lincoln, I think, is on much solid ground, and knows that he is, in affirming the universality of that latter feeling, the feeling about "myself," than the former. After all, as he concedes, volumes and volumes had been written to justify the slavery of others, but no one willingly chooses this for himself. In a word, Lincoln's third, or rational argument, is much better as an argument. As a matter of logic, as a matter of clear thinking, Lincoln proves that one can accept slavery for another only on pain of self-contradiction. Yet Lincoln knows that human beings do not consider the pain of self contradiction the worst pain that they might suffer.

He once sat down to imagine the case of the Reverend Dr. Ross. Actually he didn't--actually, he read a book by this guy, Reverend Dr. Ross of Alabama. He was a slave holder, a conscientious man, a minister, who came to ask himself the question whether his slave should be a slave. Dr. Ross goes on a bit, a bit about his and he cannot find a direct and unambiguous answer from the Bible and certainly as Lincoln put it, never bother to ask the slave what he thought about the subject. So then they--this is now a quotation from Lincoln. "So at last, it comes to this, that Dr. Ross is to decide this question. And while he considers it, he sits in the shade, with gloves on his hands, and subsists on the bread his slaves are earning in the burning sun. If he decides that God wills these slaves free, he thereby has to walk out of the shade, throw off his gloves, and delve for his own bread. Will Dr. Ross be actuated by that perfect impartiality, which has ever been considered most favorable to correct decisions?" Well, we know the answer to that The Reverend Ross is more willing to suffer the pain of contradiction than the pain of

hard labor in the hot sun. Only if human beings generally found the pain of self contradiction less powerful than other pains would rational argument be as conclusive in practice as they are in theory.

What makes a proposition true and what makes a proposition effective as a maxim of action are in fact quite different things. This is the single--are you ready? This is the single most important truth about politics; this disparity sets the task for statesmanship--to make the true and good and right also the effectual, or to bring those elements as close together as possible. This is both what holds politics and morality together, and what distinguishes them from each other. This is what separates the task of the moral philosopher and the scholarly critic, like those historians who get on Lincoln's case, to what distinguishes those guys from the political actor of the highest kind. No political actor in American history understood this truth more fully, and acted upon it more thoughtfully and creatively than Lincoln.

So Lincoln made these three arguments against slavery: an argument from direct feeling, an argument from our faith, and an argument from reason. The argument from reason was true, but as such ineffective; the argument from feeling was effective so far as it was true, that is, so far as the feeling, that is that revulsion against slavery, was actually felt. Reason ascertains truth but feeling prompts action. But the feeling against slavery for others is fragile. Lincoln knew perfectly well of many who held slaves without revulsion, the Reverend Ross being one of them. Reasoning points to the truth of the anti-slavery position but reasoning is ineffective without support of feeling, and feeling is unreliable. It is too variable, too uncertain in itself: it needs to be formed, focused, and channeled.

In this context, Lincoln's other argument against slavery comes into its own: the argument from "our ancient faith"; that is, from the American consensus on the doctrines of the Declaration of Independence. The fragility of both reason and feeling points to the need to cultivate fundamental, moral, and political truth in the mode of faith. Like the ancient faith of God's people, this is our ancient faith, our inheritance from our fathers. Lincoln preaches the universal and rational truth of freedom as the particularistic and sub-rational inheritance of this people and its history. Lincoln attempts to attach the reverence reserved for the most sacred and venerable things to the fundamental truths of political life. The task for Lincoln's statesmanship is to make the Declaration of Independence, the object of an almost religious attachment. He took the truths of John Locke and Thomas Jefferson, two men of the enlightenment, who thought that rational argument plus self-interest would suffice to produce a decent and true political order. And Lincoln then infused that--infused their truths -- with the spirit of religion and poetry.

Now it should be clear why Lincoln saw that he had to counter the apparently statesmanly accommodation Stephen Douglas was attempting to sell the nation. Douglas might perhaps gain some temporary political peace, but his policy would endanger the conditions for future political health, because it would further wean the nation away from its ancient faith, from its unreflective belief and feelings in favor of universal equality of rights and freedom. Worse than the existence of slavery itself, in other words, is the spreading of the view that slavery is a matter of indifference; that the nation can and should be neutral. So long as the moral evil of slavery is reaffirmed, so long as the ancient faith is kept

alive, then, Lincoln believed, we could rest secure in the belief that this evil would be abolished from the land in the course of time.

He knew that his intransigence carried risks, but he thought the alternative was worse. He knew also that the disparity between what is true and what is effective meant that at any moment the one who understands the relation between morality and politics properly must always, always settle for less than morality, or the abolitionists demand it. But that man must also always keep the moral principle alive so that another statesman, another day, might aim at another, in a more far-reaching conjunction between the moral truth and the politically efficacious feeling.

This task is different in detail for us today than it was for him, but in form it is just the same. So I can do no better than close out my "Thinkin' about Lincoln" than by quoting from his speech against the Supreme Court's decision in Dred Scott case, and this is what Lincoln said there. This is in response to what the Chief Justice said, remember, that the Declaration of Independence did not apply to the blacks. Lincoln said this, "The framers of the Declaration of Independence defined with tolerable distinctness in what respects they did consider all men created equal, equal in certain inalienable rights. This they said and this they meant. They did not mean to assert the obvious untruth, that all men were then enjoying that equality, nor yet, that they were about to confer it immediately upon them. In fact they had no power to confer such a boon. They meant simply to declare the right, so that enforcement of it might follow as fast as circumstances should allow. They meant to set up a standard maxim for a free society, which could be familiar to all, and revered by all, constantly looked up to, constantly labored for, and even though never perfectly attained, constantly approximated, and thereby constantly spreading and deepening its influence, and augmenting the happiness and value of life to all people of all colors everywhere."

So as Lincoln has it, the proper standard for judging a statesman is not whether he or she attains the unattainable, but whether he or she does the good achievable in the circumstances and allows the possibility for doing more in the future. Lincoln renewed his nation's awareness of this standard maxim of political right and therein kept open the door to further achievement of right. He did his part. He reminds us that it always remains our task to do ours. Thank you.

[ Applause ]

I don't know what the drill is but I'm happy to entertain questions or hear your comments if you have any. Yes?

**Audience member:** So, was Lincoln one of the first people who started, or continued, to continue the sort of deification of the founding fathers? Was he – do you think that [inaudible] based on the Declaration of Independence were instrumental in the growth of the founding fathers reverence?

**Dr. Zuckert:** The question I have--in the back, I assume you didn't hear the question. Am I right? Okay, so I'll try to repeat--restate the question. Was Lincoln one of the first to start the American practice of

revering the founding fathers? And was his use of this kind of argument in the attempt to combat slavery part of the development of that practice in American? Is that a fair restatement? Okay. The answer is both yes and no. That is, Lincoln was not the first to start to admire--put up on some kind of pedestal, the founders. This was something that started actually rather early in the American experience. But -- one of the reasons being that the Americans came to see early on that the Constitution was the one thing that they had all on in common that held the country together, because America was a very diverse place, a very large place. And so, the Constitution was--and it was there for those people who made the Constitution were said--seem to be important. Some of it was myth making but I think there was a lot of sincerity to it also. But I believe it's also true to say that Lincoln elevated this already existing tendency in the American political culture to a level that had not reached before and that his--he brings a kind of poetry to it that nobody before him had done. And so, therefore, he is unsurpassed I think in doing that. So I say yes or no to your questions. Fair enough? Anything else? Yes sir.

**Audience member:** With all the concern with [inaudible] the national bank, things like that, can you discuss the influence of the Kentucky politician Henry Clay on turning Lincoln into more focused on abolition rather than economic issues?

**Dr. Zuckert:** Okay. So the question--the question was something like this that early in his career, Lincoln was a follower actually of Henry Clay, of the so-called American system that Henry Clay sponsored. That was a policy of support for economic development including support for the federal government engaging in internal improvements, support for national bank, things of that sort, associated with the, let's say, the rise of capitalism, that's just for short. And so, the question is, was Lincoln's admiration for Clay any part of his turn towards anti-slavery? Okay. That's a good question and, of course, a difficult one to sort out all of the elements that go into the makeup of a man like Lincoln. It is true, by the way, just to emphasize this, Lincoln always was in those early years -- in the pre-Civil War years -- a supporter of, you might say, a larger national government presence, more national powers than the democratic party was supporting, and that he favored the use of those powers to foster economic development. In fact in his very first campaign, the very first political campaign he ever ran, he ran for the state legislature in Illinois and his main platform was that the Illinois State Legislature should develop the Sangamon River which ran near where he was living in Salem--New Salem, where he was living at that time. So he was on record from his very--you know, in a way, his first political statement is supporting policies like this.

Henry Clay was himself -- you know, he's from Kentucky and was known as the great compromiser and was instrumental in fashioning various of the compromises about slavery, which I merely took for granted in my talk and didn't go through with you, but there were a series of compromises prior to 1854 when the Kansas-Nebraska Act was passed and--which brought Lincoln back on to the stage. As a great compromiser, I think Clay was more associated with the cause of the Union than he was with the cause of anti-slavery. That is, he was trying to find formulas that would work to make politics--make compromise possible. Lincoln favored those compromises in general. But Lincoln's anti-slavery much preceded his--any involvement with Clay. Lincoln was--there is testimony of Lincoln being anti-slavery

from his very youngest days. That is he grew--his family never--they were poor. They were poor farmers, his family, and they were--from the start, they were a bit always resentful of all those rich guys who have slaves. And also the religious background of Lincoln's family was also anti-slavery. So there are a number of factors that went into this quite prior to his actual stepping into the--onto the political stage, including one where he road--he went down to New Orleans on a flatboat and he saw--that was the first time he really saw slavery on a large scale and it really repelled him. He was quite upset about it. So I think there is other things than Clay at work there, although Clay was his hero politically for a long time. Yes.

**Audience member:** You just mentioned Lincoln's religious background — [inaudible] his moral compass about slavery and the Bible. And there's some debate about his religious values — theist, deist, atheist, you know...

**Dr. Zuckert:** Yes, right, right. Well, the question has to do with Lincoln's own religious background and that there is quite a bit a debate about it, which is absolutely correct. So Lincoln came out of a sort of normal, we might now say, Evangelical Christian background; his family were Baptists. He was dragged to church with them very often when he was young. He didn't like it. He tried not to go as often as he could. That is I guess known about his youth. In his 20s, I guess it was, he got known as a kind of free thinker — “free thinker” meaning a kind of nice way of saying atheist or doubter about religion. And he even wrote something rather that was taken as very atheist in character. He--it's proved to be an embarrassment for him politically because you could not actually win office as that kind of person, you know, in Illinois in those days. So he quickly renounced all of that and just kept quiet about religion really for a long time.

Then during the Civil War or maybe a little bit before the Civil War, we start to see the infusion into Lincoln's rhetoric a very biblical, really biblical themes, and expressions of belief that seem quite sincere and biblical in a way in their character. He never was a member of a regular--I mean other than his youth -- member of a regular church. And--you know, it's a question that is debated because it's really hard to know what exactly--where he came out at the end of the day on religion. But if you were to read over, and I recommend this, I recommended the Lincoln-Douglas debates too but I recommend also--well, I recommend, you know, all of Lincoln's writings to you, but particularly the second inaugural. This is where the deep religious feelings really come out the most strong. And it's a beautiful speech and it's only about three pages long, so it wouldn't tax too much of your energy to read it. So I recommend that. And after reading that, maybe form your own judgment about where Lincoln stands religiously. He was quite religious in his efforts not to make too clear to people what his religious views were, I have to say that. In this regard, he's a little bit like Thomas Jefferson before him who also had reasons to keep his religious views a little bit quiet. But he was not--clear to say, he was not an orthodox believer. He was no Jimmy Carter at that. If anybody remembers who Jimmy Carter is. Anything else out there? Yeah.

**Audience member:** Regarding his reverence for the founding fathers ... is there, In particular, one that influenced Lincoln more so than others?

**Dr. Zuckert:** Yes. The question is, Lincoln expressed the reverence for the founding fathers, was there a founding father in particular that he admired above others? The answer is, yes, Thomas Jefferson. He admired Jefferson. At least, most often, he expressed that in terms of Jefferson's authorship of the Declaration of Independence. This, for Lincoln, was like the single most important thing Americans had ever done and Jefferson was the one who did it. So, he admired Jefferson above the others, but he had great respect obviously for all of them. But he saw--so for example, Professor Gibson and I share a great admiration for James Madison and I think Lincoln admired Madison and he admired the Constitution, but he always thought that the Constitution was secondary to the Declaration of Independence, that the Constitution was a means to achieve what the Declaration of Independence set out as the moral goals of this nation. And so, the Declaration was a higher, more important thing. Yeah.

**Audience member:** As Dr. Gibson as attempted to during the semester, to pound into our heads, that there were many cases after the Civil War where, even though the blacks had been emancipated, that there was, basically, persecution. Given the fact that Lincoln was both a lawyer and a politician, how could he address the fact that the government was still perpetrating this?

**Dr. Zuckert:** Well, of course, you know, Lincoln was dead before any of that happened. And so, it's hard to blame him for it. [laughter] You know, it's a good question. What would Lincoln--you know, the old question, what would Lincoln have done? What would have Lincoln have done if he had lived to preside over Reconstruction? And the--you know, we don't know exactly. Yet the beginnings of a Lincolnian reconstruction policy were visible, but, you know, we don't know how it would have really turned out. And Reconstruction itself was a very dynamic thing. That is it wasn't--it started out one way and it kind of moved in various directions as time went on.

My sense of it is that Lincoln would have been more--you know, what happened in reconstruction was that at first, the moderate Republicans controlled reconstruction. But then the radical Republicans got controlled of reconstruction and they imposed a very punitive and harsh policy in the South, which turned out to be both hated by the South and not very effective. But they did attempt to enforce civil rights through their policy and they did try to protect the freemen. One great achievement that the Republicans--that the moderate Republicans did accomplished while they were in charged was to pass the 14th Amendment. I mean the 14th Amendment, next to the Declaration of Independence, is a great treasure of American political culture. But the end result was that the radical--you know, as often happens in politics, the radical policy went too far really and was unsuccessful. And so, guess what? We got a reaction against it in which we--in which the nation in effect withdrew completely from the South, said, "The race issue is yours to settle," (I.e., you white people who are running the governments in the South). "It's for you to settle and we're not going to--we're going to wash our hands of it and we're moving on." As I think I said in my talk, we're moving on, we've got an economy to develop here. We're really--you know, we're really building railroads and we're building steel plants and all those kind of things and we're getting really wealthy, and so we have all the things to worry about. And so, that was the precondition for what happened, what I think the thing as Professor Gibson was talking to you about, about all the injustices that were committed. I think that Lincoln would have followed a more middle course which would have been not completely leaving these folks to their own devices, but not

as harsh is what the radical republicans imposed and that it might have been a more successful policy. I mean, remember, this is going to be a difficult policy to make work because, well, for all kinds of reasons, you can imagine. So, it isn't clear to me that any reconstruction policy could have worked. But I think if anybody could have made it work, Lincoln could have. Yes.

**Audience member:** [Inaudible] ... and maybe extrapolating about how we have the institution of slavery today, comparing the politics of the 1860s to what we have now, do you think slavery would have been abolished now?

**Dr. Zuckert:** You mean under present political circumstances? Well, of course, it's hardly--that's such a hard hypothetical question to deal with because what else would be different today if we had slavery still? I mean I can't imagine that the present political configuration would be exactly what it is if we had slavery in place. I mean since the present political configuration doesn't seem able to solve any problems, I guess they wouldn't solve that problem either. So, that would be--that's my quick off the cuff answer to that question, yeah. It's a good hypothetical though.

**Audience member:** Clearly, as your presentation makes clear, Lincoln thought profoundly about why slavery was wrong. Did he think profoundly about what constitutes slavery? Would he have had a more expansive understanding? Would Lincoln be open to something like slaves as [inaudible], like they're such a--would there be such a conception?

**Dr. Zuckert:** Yeah, the question is, Lincoln--granted that Lincoln thought profoundly about slavery. But did he think about why slavery was wrong, but did he give equal thought to the question of--a broader question of what slavery exactly was? That is, what are the outlines of slavery? What might be considered slavery that isn't literally slavery, perhaps? So, he gave the example of wage slavery. Might Lincoln have thought of wage slavery as a kind of slavery? Lincoln was contra--to the consternation of many people on the Left who admire Lincoln, he was a great fan of capitalism and of market economies, and he thought on the whole that these were beneficial for mankind and he favored--he was not exactly *laissez-faire* because he favored government involvement to produce for economic development but he was not a--he was not a socialist, he was not a redistributionist or anything like that. So, he would not sign on to a Marxist agenda, that I think is pretty clear. On the other hand, I mean, under certain circumstances I think he might accept the idea that there might be something like waged slavery if there, for example, is as occurred in the South, you know, very limited opportunities for moving around from employment. You know, you work for this guy or you work for nobody, that sort of thing. And he would've seen that as monopolistic and that's not a real market and that's not a real state. And therefore, that would be--that would justify involvement I think. So, Lincoln was a supporter of--Lincoln certainly would've supported the 14th Amendment which would I think outlaw some of the kinds that worry--things that produce the bad results we were talking about. Whether Lincoln would condemn, you know, capitalism per se as an example of waged slavery, I don't think so, if that's what you're asking. Yeah, all right, right I am. I guess I am. I don't know what that means but I'm in Chico, okay. Anything else? Yeah, sir.

**Audience member:** [inaudible]

**Dr. Zuckert:** Yes. That was really the point--that was really the point, maybe the culminating point, that I wanted to make; that Lincoln really presents to us an understanding of what political statesmanship at its best involves. It involves, on the one hand, understanding the truth in a rational way but also understanding that the rational truth can only be accepted if the feelings of the people are brought along to support that truth. And that, for the most part, rational--you know, there are limits to how much rational argument persuades people, they're persuaded for the most part by other things. And this is why rhetoric becomes so important. And why Lincoln is such an important President to us because -- or an important figure in our history-- is because he was the greatest rhetorician probably that we ever had. That is the great--he knew how to speak to the hearts of our people more than anybody else. And that's I think what a president has to do. So, I think Lincoln would've been, you know, some of the political speeches that we get now -- you know, like the State of the Union Address where we get a laundry list of policy proposals. I don't know if anybody actually pays attention to that other than the interest groups that are involved, but this is not speaking to the people in the way that Lincoln suggests that we need to. So, I think if many of our political leaders went to school with Lincoln, they would learn to speak differently to the people than they do. Among other things, neither laundry--long laundry lists nor merely sound bytes -- I think, you know, you have to find that middle ground between those two things. So, yes, but I think you're right. That's the--I mean you put your finger on what I think is the most important thing to come out of Lincoln's attempt to deal with the slavery issue. That is, this way of thinking about what politics always involves. This both--this disparity and this parallelism between the moral truth and the--and what it takes to make for action, for actual political action, so.

**Dr. Gibson:** How about one final question?

**Dr. Zuckert:** Okay. Okay.

**Audience member:** Was Lincoln or would Lincoln have been a feminist?

**Dr. Zuckert:** The question is would Lincoln have been a feminist? Well, you know, again, that's another one of those hypotheticals that's hard to answer. I think Lincoln would have been--he would have supported suffrage, I would guess. I think he would support equality for women. I mean, again, feminism, there's such a range of things covered by it. I think Lincoln would have supported equal pay for equal work. I think he would have supported Title IX. But some of the things that I've seen some time that his writer say, I'm not sure he'll support all those, but, yes, I think he would've been what we now call liberal feminist. I think he would've been. Yes. Go give one boy.

**Audience member:** So in the piece you presented, the last century and the division on scholarship-- interpretation like this, what do you see [inaudible] relate to the thinking of the 21st century [inaudible]...

**Dr. Zuckert:** Oh yeah, interesting. Yeah, that's very good. The question had to do with--you know, I spoke about the reactions to Lincoln in the first half of the 20th century and then in the second half of the 20th century. And now the question is, well, what about the way the 21st century is looking at Lincoln and the reference was particularly to the new--to the film about Lincoln which, if you haven't seen, focuses on his efforts to get the 13th Amendment through Congress. You know, I would say that that film -- I wrote--I have to say I wrote this long before that film came out, but that film shares a perspective with what I said, I believe. Because, it says, there--the line in it that I remember most vividly is that it's not enough to have a roadmap or a blueprint or a wall compass or something like that points you towards the end goal that you need, because that doesn't tell you about all the bogs and precipices and things that come in between that you need to deal with. And that I think is another way of talking about what I've just been talking about as the task of statesmanship. That is, to keep that goal in mind but to realize what it takes to actually get there. And that to try to get there, you need to--you know, you're going to need to make compromises with the world. So, Lincoln made compromises with the existence of slavery where it was but he made that--I mean this is such an important point, I think. That compromise was made in such a way as never to say that it was all right that slavery existed. That it's an evil and it should be--I mean we've got it but we should do away with it somehow if we can figure out how. And I think the same with what he did with the 13th Amendment. I mean so there he was actually doing away with the evil. But he was willing to cut deals, you know, do all these shady things that they show him doing. Well, that's, you know, you don't want to see how these laws were just made. You don't how see how legislation is made. That's right. Okay.

**Dr. Gibson:** Thank you very much.

**Dr. Zuckert:** Thank you.

[ Applause ]