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### The American Colonization Society and Underlying Abolitionist Racism

The debate over slavery was a pressing issue throughout the early history of the United States, dating as far back as before the establishment of the Union. There were some who recognized the injustices that those who were enslaved faced and did not support the institution. Although early abolitionists were few and far between, some, such as free and educated black man Benjamin Banneker, pushed abolition as early as 1791. He wrote to Thomas Jefferson critiquing “the State of tyrannical thralldom, and inhuman captivity, to which too many of my brethren are doomed” (Banneker) and asked that Jefferson consider granting rights and freedom to African Americans. However, the slave issue did not come to the foreground of American politics until the early to mid 1800s, where intense debates between abolitionists and pro-slavery southerners occurred and several attempts at a compromise were made. In 1816, the establishment of the American Colonization Society provided a sort of middle ground that was supported by both abolitionists and some slave owners who believed it would be impossible to unite free blacks and white Americans into a single union. The American Colonization Society was a prominent organization that lasted throughout the 1800s into the 1900s, and it supported sending African Americans to colonize areas of Africa and Central America in order to ease racial tensions in the United States. This movement was initially supported by many abolitionists, including Abraham Lincoln and Henry Clay, but its impracticality and the degrading effect that it

would have on African Americans was completely ignored. Those in support of the organization completely disregarded African Americans, and fully intended to remove them from and destroy their society due to the color of their skin. Despite abolitionists being against slavery and seeing it as morally wrong, some believed that African Americans should not and would not ever have the same rights as the white man and saw colonization as the easiest way to get rid of racial tensions. Therefore, the American Colonization Society was proof of early abolitionists' indifference for the lives and rights of African Americans as well as their failure to work towards true equality. Abolitionist support of this movement proved that the abolitionist movement was hindered by underlying racist attitudes.

The American Colonization Society was founded in 1861 by Presbyterian minister Robert Finley who believed that African Americans would never be able to fully and completely be unified with the white American population. Finley saw colonization as “a charitable work, one that would benefit American blacks and Africans alike through the spreading of Christianity to Africa,” prompting a “gradual end to slavery” (“American Colonization Society”). Finley took his opinions to Washington, D.C., and the American Colonization Society was established. It garnered many different supporters: some who wanted to abolish slavery, some who were allied with free blacks, and some who, much like Finley, believed that the “presence of blacks in America [was] a threat to the national well-being and the quality of life for whites” (“American Colonization Society”). At first, the organization received a tentative response of support from free African Americans, but was then quickly rejected. In spite of the opposition of free blacks of the society, the organization gained support from many important people in the political world - notably, Henry Clay.

Clay's beliefs about slavery were deeply complicated. Although he stated that he "regard[ed] the existence of slavery as an evil," he later contradicted this statement by saying that "[he] regard[s] it as a far less evil than would arise out of an immediate emancipation of the slaves of the United States, and their remaining here mixed up in our communities" (Clay's letter to Jacob Gibson). Clay fully believed that colonization was the only way the slavery issue could be resolved and thought that free African Americans spreading throughout the country would be detrimental to national unity. He did not ever refer to himself as an abolitionist; rather, he called himself a moderate who did not believe slavery was morally right, but recognized the rights of the states to hold slaves as well as the mass chaos he believed would ensue if emancipation were to be enacted. In some instances, he seemed to be in complete opposition of abolitionism, as is exemplified in his letter to his biographer, Calvin Colton, where he gave suggestions on an anti-abolitionist pamphlet and stated how the "agitation of the question in free states will first destroy all harmony and finally lead to disunion" (Clay's letter to Calvin Colton). He believed that if slaves were freed and "dispersed throughout the union; they would enter into competition with the American... reduce his wages; be confounded with him; and affect his moral & social standing" (Clay's letter to Calvin Colton). Clay supported a gradual end to slavery but believed that it was impossible for freed slaves and white Americans to coexist together and that the only option for slavery to end successfully was through African American colonization in Liberia. He likely perceived African Americans as the root cause for conflict in the Union and saw no possibility for them to remain a part of the Union without more violence. Clay showed clear and obvious racism through his adamant support of the American Colonization Society as well as his

degrading remarks towards those trapped in slavery, despite his apparent opinion that the institution was immoral.

A large part of the slavery debate was over whether slavery should be able to expand to the West. Many southerners had begun to deal with soil erosion and destruction from overworking the land and felt that they should be able to move west with their slaves in order to continue their economic success and crop output. However, most northerners and members of the Republican party and the Free-Soil party greatly opposed this idea. The Free-Soil party was formed by leftover antislavery Whigs and Democrats with a primary platform opposing the extension of slavery into the Western territories. This idea, supported by most abolitionists, “was an important demand, but it was one that combined economic ends and antislavery goals. Free soil meant preserving the West for white settlers” and “was often accompanied by the demand that all blacks, slave and free, be barred from the territories” (Egnal). Most early abolitionists had no intent to grant African Americans equal rights, and in the end, a large part of abolitionism was for the benefit of white Northerners. This is important in understanding why there was so much early abolitionist support of the American Colonization Society. Some, like Henry Clay, believed that the full integration of blacks into a predominantly white society would be near impossible and would continue the white anxiety that a growing free black population would lead to violence and rebellion. However, there is a possibility that some truly believed that colonization would benefit African Americans and that “black people living in America would never receive the full benefits of citizenship, and that they would fare much better on the friendly shores of Africa” (American Colonization Society). However, it’s unclear as to why Abraham Lincoln,

one of the organization's biggest supporters and a committed abolitionist, supported the American Colonization Society.

Lincoln's support of the American Colonization likely stemmed from his idolization of Henry Clay, who adamantly supported it. However, Lincoln's support of the organization has remained ambiguous; it is not clear whether he truly believed in the colonization movement or if he was just using it as a way to slowly push his abolitionist views and not come off as too radical. Even as a child, Lincoln always opposed slavery and believed it to be completely immoral. He believed that "all men were created equal but thought that blacks and whites could never live together because of their physical difference and could never reach political and social equality" ("Colonization"). He was a staunch abolitionist, but his support of the American Colonization Society is questionable, and shows a great flaw in his character: internalized racism. This racism is mostly associated with his belief in the physical inferiority of blacks to whites, leading him to assume that equality was impossible. Lincoln was famous for bringing colonization into his speeches, most notably in his speech on the Kansas Nebraska Act in Peoria, Illinois, when he stated that "If all earthly power were given me, I should not know what to do, as to the existing institution. My first impulse would be to free all the slaves, and send them to Liberia,—to their own native land" (Lincoln "Speech on the Kansas Nebraska Act at Peoria, Illinois, 1854"). He believed that slavery was morally, legally, and economically wrong, but turned to colonization as the correct way to go about dealing with slavery. Lincoln made several political decisions during his presidency promoting and acting upon colonization, before realizing the ineffectiveness of colonization and deciding to emancipate slaves in his renowned Emancipation Proclamation.

In 1862, Lincoln, whose “remarks on the occasion have long been considered a low point of his presidency” (Magness) met with a group of African Americans in the White House to announce his idea for colonization. He “blamed the coming of the Civil War on the presence of the black race” (Magness) and said that colonization and separation would be the only way for blacks to have any form of equality. His statement was heavily criticized, especially by African American abolitionist Frederick Douglass, who pointed out the inherent racism in his actions. Lincoln showed a significant amount of carelessness when it came to enacting plans of colonization, showing that perhaps Lincoln had little regard for black lives, despite being seen as the ultimate abolitionist. Later in the year, Lincoln sent 450 African Americans to an island near present day Haiti in a colonization attempt. It eventually failed due to a smallpox outbreak and Lincoln wrote to his Secretary of War, Edwin Stanton, instructing him to “have a transport...sent to the colored colony...to bring back to this country such of the colonists there as desire to return” (Lincoln’s letter to Edwin Stanton). There was clear mismanagement of the colony on the behalf of the government which showed the obvious impracticalities of colonization as well as Lincoln’s indifference toward black lives.

Lincoln consistently promoted gradual emancipation accompanied with colonization. However, colonization was not necessarily “Lincoln's *plan* but *one* of Lincoln's *plans*. Lincoln seem[ed] to have envisioned colonization as one of several things necessary to free the slaves and the nation from slavery” (Paludan). Unlike Clay, Lincoln didn’t see colonization as the ultimate solution to the slavery issue; he had other plans in order to win the war, restore the Union, and eventually free the slaves. However, Lincoln’s continued push of colonization, even after it had started to fade out, should be remembered and acknowledged. The majority of

abolitionists, Lincoln included, had racist intentions, whether through support of the colonization movement or a refusal to respect African American rights and lives. The prejudice that the black race has suffered for centuries is not due to just the fifteen slave states in the South, but to the country and world as a whole.

In the end, the American Colonization Society transported nearly 12,000 African Americans back to Liberia or to areas in Central America. The organization was active until they sent their “last settlers in 1904, but then “functioned as a Liberian aid society until it finally dissolved in 1967” (Brendon). Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, and in the following years, the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments were passed, abolishing slavery, granting citizenship and voting rights to African American people. However, African American people still faced incredible amounts of discrimination, much of which they still experience today. The institution of slavery lasted for hundreds of years due to the tendency of abolitionists to allow the suffering of African Americans, as long as it didn’t interfere with their guilty conscience, which is exactly what the American Colonization Society intended to do.

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