

Race and the American Identity (Part II)

Americans have long taken racial nationalism for granted.

by Samuel Francis

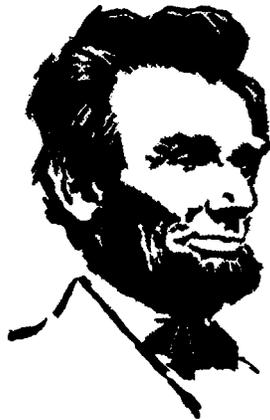
In the first part of this article Dr. Francis described some of the versions of a "universal" American identity that are now commonly promoted. He contrasted this with the thinking of the founders and with racial practices and assumptions that were widespread in both the North and the South. He concludes in this issue.

As late as 1921, Vice-President-elect Calvin Coolidge wrote an article on immigration called "Whose Country Is This?" in the popular women's magazine *Good Housekeeping*. He argued that "There are racial considerations too grave to be brushed aside for any sentimental reasons. Biological laws tell us that certain divergent people will not mix or blend. The Nordics propagate themselves successfully. With other races, the outcome shows deterioration on both sides. Quality of mind and body suggests that observance of ethnic law is as great a necessity to a nation as immigration law." Not only the white but the Northern European racial identity of the nation could thus be publicly affirmed by a leading national political figure in a widely read magazine as late as the 1920s.

What President Coolidge wrote then was by no means exotic or alien. Thomas Jefferson's views of racial equality are probably well known to AR readers. In *Notes on the States of Virginia*, he discussed the significant natural differences between the races, and while he was, at least in principle, opposed to slavery, he was adamantly in favor of forbidding free blacks to continue to live within the United States. Nor did he favor non-European immigration into the Northwest Territory nor into the lands of the Louisiana Purchase. In 1801 he looked forward to the day "when our rapid multiplication will expand itself . . . over the whole northern, if not the southern continent, with a people speaking the same language, governed in similar

forms, and by similar laws; nor can we contemplate with satisfaction either blot or mixture on that surface."

James Lubinskas has written an excellent article in the August, 1998 *American Renaissance* on the American Colonization Society, a society that sought the expatriation of blacks to Africa, and which included as members Henry Clay, James Madison, Andrew Jackson, Daniel Webster, James Monroe, John Marshall, Winfield Scott, and many other of the most prominent



American public leaders. They may have held different views of slavery and race, but none of them believed that free blacks should or could continue to live in the same society with whites.

Nor did Abraham Lincoln entertain egalitarian views of blacks, and his clearest statements on the subject are to be found in the course of his debates with Stephen Douglas during the Illinois senatorial campaign of 1858. While opposing the extension of slavery to new states, Lincoln repeatedly assured his

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audiences that he did not believe in or favor civic equality for blacks. In the debate at Charleston, Ill., on Sept. 18, Lincoln said:

"I will say that I am not nor ever have been in favor of bringing about in any way the social and political equality of the white and black races: that I am not nor ever have been in favor of making

voters of the free negroes, or jurors, or of qualifying them to hold office, or to intermarry with white people. I will say in addition that there is a physical difference between the white and black races which I suppose will forever forbid the two races living together upon terms of social and political equality, and inasmuch as they cannot so live that while they do remain together there must be a position of superior and inferior, that I as much as any other man am in favor of having the superior position being assigned to the white man."

He repeated this and similar ideas throughout the debates. Lincoln also was strongly in favor of expatriation for blacks and seriously explored the practicality of establishing a black settlement in Central America. Indeed, he proposed what would have become, had it passed, the 13th Amendment to the Constitution permitting federal support for the colonization of blacks outside the country.

In his annual message to Congress in December, 1862, in which Lincoln made this proposal, he said:

"That portion of the earth's surface which is owned and inhabited by the people of the United States is well adapted to be the home of one national family, and it is not well adapted for two or more. Its vast extent and its variety of climate and productions are of advantage in this age for one people, whatever they might have been in former ages. Steam, telegraphs, and intelligence have brought these to be an advantageous combination for one united people."

He obviously was thinking, as a unionist, of what he regarded as the inappropriateness of secession, but he was also thinking of the inappropriateness of a different "people" or race inhabiting the same territory, and his remarks are thus a fairly clear expression of what can only be called racial nationalism.

As for Stephen Douglas, he was even more outspoken on the issue of race than Lincoln (the following passage from his opening speech in the debates is from the edition published in 1993 by Harold Holzer, which incorporates into the text the audience responses as recorded by the newspapers of the day, in this case

the *Chicago Daily Times*, a Democratic paper):

“For one, I am opposed to negro citizenship in any form. [Cheers—*Times*] I believe that this government was made on the white basis. [‘Good,’—*Times*] I believe it was made by white men for the benefit of white men and their posterity forever, and I am in favor of confining the citizenship to white men—men of European birth and European descent, instead of conferring it upon Negroes and Indians, and other inferior races. [‘Good for you. Douglas forever,’—*Times*]”

Douglas, of course, won the election.

Nor, even after the end of the war, during congressional debates on the 14th Amendment—which today is considered the cornerstone of federal enforcement of egalitarian policies—even then, there was no endorsement of racial equality. Thaddeus Stevens, whom constitutional historian Raoul Berger calls the “foremost Radical” in Congress, was not in the least committed to black voting. He was mainly concerned with perpetuating the domination of the Republican Party. It suddenly began to dawn on the Radicals that with the abolition of slavery, the three-fifths clause of the Constitution, which had limited Southern representation in Congress, was no longer meaningful. The result would be that Southern representation in Congress would be vastly increased to the point that the South, just defeated in the war, would suddenly gain political dominance.

As Professor Berger writes, “Now each voteless freedman counted as a whole person; and in the result Southern States would be entitled to increased representation and, with the help of Northern Democrats, would have, as Thaddeus Stevens pointed out at the very outset of the 39th Congress, ‘a majority in Congress and in the Electoral College.’ With equal candor he said that the Southern States ‘ought never to be recognized as valid states, until the Constitution shall be amended . . . as to secure perpetual ascendancy’ to the Republican Party.”

The 14th Amendment was passed in order to grant the federal government the authority to enforce the Civil Rights Act of 1866, and the meaning of the language of the amendment is clarified by the debates over the earlier law. The Civil Rights Act was mainly intended to overcome the so-called “Black

Codes” imposed on blacks after the end of slavery and the war, and it gave to “the inhabitants of every race” . . . “the same right to make and enforce contracts, to sue, be parties, and give evidence, to inherit, purchase, lease, sell, hold and convey real and personal property, and to full and equal benefit of all laws and proceedings for the security of person and property, and shall be subject to like punishment . . . and no other.” In explaining the language of the bill to the House, Rep. James Wilson of Iowa, chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, was explicit about the limits of the bill:

“What do these terms mean? Do they mean that in all things, civil, social, political, all citizens, without distinction of race or color, shall be equal? By no means can they be so construed. . . . Nor do they mean that all citizens shall sit on juries, or that their children shall attend the same schools. These are not civil rights and immunities. Well, what is the meaning? What are civil rights? I understand civil rights to be simply the absolute rights of individuals, such as ‘The right of personal security, the right of personal liberty, and the right to acquire and enjoy property.’ ”

Rep. James Patterson of New Hampshire, a supporter of the 14th Amendment, said much the same. He was opposed to “any law discriminating against [blacks] in the security of life, liberty, person, property and the proceeds of their labor. These civil rights all should enjoy. Beyond this I am not prepared to go, and those pretended friends who urge political and social equality . . . are . . . the worst enemies of the colored race.” Republican Senator Lyman Trumbull of Illinois, who drafted the Civil Rights Bill, concurred. “This bill is applicable exclusively to civil rights. It does not propose to regulate political rights of individuals; it has nothing to do with the right of suffrage, or any other political right.”

What the framers of the Civil Rights Bill of 1866 and the 14th Amendment were proposing, in other words, was simply to extend to the emancipated black slaves what is generally called “equality under the law,” a concept of equality that merely recognizes the equality of

citizens and does not rest on any supposition of the natural equality of human beings. Equality under the law demands that the same fundamental civil rights belong to all citizens—what are often called the “Blackstonean rights” of life, personal liberty, and property—and which

were generally agreed to be the content of the “inalienable rights” mentioned in the Declaration.

But these basic civil rights were sharply distinguished from “political rights” such as voting or holding office. The Blackstonean rights are fundamental because it is not possible for an individual citizen to function without them—to live without security of being murdered or being abducted or imprisoned or en-

slaved or having his property stolen. If the black population were not going to be enslaved and not going to be colonized abroad, it was essential that ex-slaves possess these basic civil rights simply in order to function in society; but the Blackstonean civil rights have nothing to do with voting, holding political office, sitting on juries, racial intermarriage, getting a job or being promoted, or school integration, which is what the concept of “civil rights” has come to mean today.

It would be possible to continue with an almost inexhaustible list of quotations from prominent American statesmen and intellectual leaders well into the twentieth century abjuring any belief in the equality of the races or any belief that non-white races should or can have the same political position as whites in the United States. I will not rehearse all of them, but my purpose in what I have said so far is not to invoke all these institutions and ideas about race in American history as a model of what we should seek to restore or because I necessarily agree with all the views of race that have been expressed throughout our history (indeed, some of them are more or less contradictory), but to reinforce two points: First, we are not and never were a “universal nation” or a “proposition country” defined by the equality clause of the Declaration or the bromides of the Gettysburg Address. On the contrary we—Americans in general and our public leaders in particular—repeatedly and continuously recognized the reality and

