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Abstract

In this essay I analyze the debate over Abraham Lincoln's role in the emancipation of African American slaves. Speaking both to contemporary public memory and the evidence of history, I contend that when Lincoln discussed or wrote about emancipation between 1860 and 1863, his rhetoric exhibited a dialogic form that shifted responsibility from the president to congressional leaders and common citizens. I conclude that Lincoln's dialogic rhetoric does not signal his opposition to emancipation but rather his deep belief that emancipation would become meaningful only after the considered deliberation and action of the American people.

DEBATING THE GREAT EMANCIPATOR: ABRAHAM LINCOLN AND OUR PUBLIC MEMORY

KIRT H. WILSON

In this essay I analyze the debate over Abraham Lincoln's role in the emancipation of African American slaves. Speaking both to contemporary public memory and the evidence of history, I contend that when Lincoln discussed or wrote about emancipation between 1860 and 1863, his rhetoric exhibited a dialogic form that shifted responsibility from the president to congressional leaders and common citizens. I conclude that Lincoln's dialogic rhetoric does not signal his opposition to emancipation but rather his deep belief that emancipation would become meaningful only after the considered deliberation and action of the American people.

Sometime in December of 1865, Frederick Douglass addressed a crowd to summarize the events of that year, most particularly the death of Abraham Lincoln and the cessation of formal hostilities between Union and Confederate forces.¹ In this speech, Douglass declared:

A thousand years hence . . . when the great names of military heroes which are now every where greeted with a shout shall cease to dazzle and shall be

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