

Hands off Lincoln and the Emancipation Memorial! Defend the legacy of the Civil War!

By Niles Niemuth
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The unanimous decision of the Boston Art Commission (BAC) Tuesday to remove the Emancipation Group, a public monument to Abraham Lincoln and the ending of slavery, is a reactionary attack on the progressive legacy of the Civil War that will have far-reaching consequences.

The public monument that is to be removed and “temporarily” placed into storage is a replica of the Emancipation Memorial in Washington, D.C., depicting Abraham Lincoln with his arm outstretched over a formerly enslaved man rising up from the ground, his shackles broken and his eyes to the sky and right fist thrust outward. The base reads “Emancipation.”

That such an attack on Lincoln and the progressive legacy of the Civil War can take place in Boston, the cradle of the American Revolution that contributed so much to the fight against the slave power, is an indication of deep historical ignorance among the general population that has been encouraged by the Democratic and Republican parties for their own political purposes.

The movement against police violence and racism that erupted after the murder of George Floyd is being derailed by the Democratic Party and their operatives down a right-wing path, turning the justified demands to tear down Confederate statues into attacks on monuments to George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, Ulysses S. Grant and abolitionist Union officers like Robert Gould Shaw and Hans Christian Heg.

The decision in Boston sets a precedent for the removal of the original in Washington, D.C. on the same spurious grounds. Protestors have declared their intention to tear down the monument, and Democrat Eleanor Holmes Norton, the nonvoting representative for the nation’s capital in Congress, has announced a plan to introduce a bill authorizing the “problematic” statue’s removal from Lincoln Park.

The ignominious vote by the commission came after two hours of public testimony in which the gates were flung open for a flood of racist falsifications and slanders of Lincoln and the monument.

Anne Boelcskev, a lecturer in African American Studies at Boston University, told the commission that walking past the statue made her feel “nauseated” and repeated the false claim that abolitionist Frederick Douglass did not like the monument. Thalia Yunen, a public relations specialist at Liberty Mutual Insurance, said that the monument to emancipation was a “microaggression” against African Americans and Hispanics because it depicts Lincoln as a “white savior.”

The worst slanders were spewed by Greg Ux, a personal trainer in

Boston and founder of a microfinance nonprofit, who declared Lincoln a racist unworthy of a monument since while he was president “segregationist and racist ideas oozed from the highest office in the land.”

There were only a few comments in favor of the monument allowed during the hearing, including from Cedric Turner, the great-great-great grandson of Archer Alexander, the freedman depicted in the monument. Dorris Keeven-Franke, Alexander’s biographer, also spoke in favor of the monument noting that it does not depict a slave on his knees but “rising and looking up to the future.” Anne Khaminwa, an MIT graduate, told the commission that the monument “successfully captures the moment of the emancipated slave getting up from slavery.”

Despite these efforts, the racialists held the day. The opinions of those who testified were not simply their own but were the outcome of a long-standing campaign to discredit the monument.

A 2018 report produced for the BAC by Boston University art history PhD student Ewa Matczyk, “Opportunity for Change,” declared the monument to be “racist and condescending” for depicting an “African American figure as subservient to a white counterpart.” It is claimed that the statue “[i]mplies that the Abolition Movement and struggle to end slavery can be singlehandedly attributed to one individual.”

Despite the subjective feelings of those who want to see the Emancipation Memorial banished from public view, there is nothing objectively racist about the statue, which depicts the end of slavery in the United States. In fact, it is a just tribute to Lincoln.

While not an open abolitionist, Lincoln’s political record prior to the Civil War was outstanding, and he had come to be seen years prior to 1860 as the leading spokesman of the antislavery forces in the United States. The southern slavocracy certainly understood what it meant when he won the presidency, responding to his rise to the White House with secession. To the extent that any one individual in history can be credited with playing a decisive role in the destruction of slavery it is undoubtedly Lincoln.

Furthermore, the statue does not portray Alexander in a racist manner or as subhuman but as a man, with imagery drawn from abolitionist literature. The monument is a celebration of the end of the cruelest form of oppression and the role that Lincoln played in this process as the leader of the Second American Revolution and author of the Emancipation Proclamation.

The original monument, paid for by subscriptions from former slaves, was commissioned by abolitionist William Greenleaf Eliot and

created by Thomas Ball, a prominent American sculptor who lived in Florence, Italy. While in Florence, Ball moved in the artistic circle of antislavery poets Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, exposing him to the heights of abolitionist writing.

Eliot recalled seeing a small model of Lincoln and freed slaves during a visit to Ball's studio and thought it would be a fitting memorial. It was at Eliot's urging that Alexander was made the model for the freed slave. Ball worked in a naturalistic style presenting the figures of Lincoln and Alexander in a realistic, sympathetic manner.

As it was in the case of those who testified at the Boston Art Commission, Douglass's speech dedicating the monument in 1876 has often been cherry-picked or misconstrued to declare that the preeminent African American abolitionists disapproved of the monument and did not care much for Lincoln himself. While he outlines what free blacks and the ex-slaves saw as Lincoln's shortcomings and slow movement towards abolishing slavery at the beginning of the war, Douglass's speech is an objective and deeply perceptive recognition of Lincoln's progressive and monumental role in history.

In the context of the effort to use Douglass against Lincoln, it is worth quoting at length from his dedication speech. He began by noting what he saw as the importance of the Emancipation Memorial, explaining, "we, the colored people, newly emancipated and rejoicing in our blood-bought freedom, near the close of the first century in the life of this Republic, have now and here unveiled, set apart, and dedicated a monument of enduring granite and bronze, in every line, feature, and figure of which the men of this generation may read, and those of aftercoming generations may read, something of the exalted character and great works of Abraham Lincoln, the first martyr President of the United States."

He then explained why former slaves held Lincoln in the highest regard, regardless of his contradiction:

Despite the mist and haze that surrounded him; despite the tumult, the hurry, and confusion of the hour, we were able to take a comprehensive view of Abraham Lincoln, and to make reasonable allowance for the circumstances of his position. We saw him, measured him, and estimated him; not by stray utterances to injudicious and tedious delegations, who often tried his patience; not by isolated facts torn from their connection; not by any partial and imperfect glimpses, caught at inopportune moments; but by a broad survey, in the light of the stern logic of great events, and in view of that divinity which shapes our ends, rough hew them how we will, we came to the conclusion that the hour and the man of our redemption had somehow met in the person of Abraham Lincoln. It mattered little to us what language he might employ on special occasions; it mattered little to us, when we fully knew him, whether he was swift or slow in his movements; it was enough for us that Abraham Lincoln was at the head of a great movement, and was in living and earnest sympathy with that movement, which, in the nature of things, must go on until slavery should be utterly and forever abolished in the United States.

Later in the speech he noted:

Few great public men have ever been the victims of fiercer denunciation than Abraham Lincoln was during his administration. He was often wounded in the house of his friends. Reproaches came thick and fast upon him from within and from without, and from opposite quarters. He was assailed by Abolitionists; he was assailed by slave-holders; he was assailed by the men who were for peace at any price; he was assailed by those who were for a more vigorous prosecution of the war; he was assailed for not making the war an abolition war; and he was bitterly assailed for making the war an abolition war.

But now behold the change: the judgment of the present hour is, that taking him for all in all, measuring the tremendous magnitude of the work before him, considering the necessary means to ends, and surveying the end from the beginning, infinite wisdom has seldom sent any man into the world better fitted for his mission than Abraham Lincoln.

Douglass understood that it was necessary to judge Lincoln by his ultimate success in expunging chattel slavery from the United States, a world historic task that he had undertaken with resolve and seen through to its finish with the defeat of the Confederacy. Lincoln refused the entreaties of many that he seek a compromise with the South, which would have accepted its demands for the continuation of slavery. He refused to bow before the slave owners. Lincoln was the political author of the 13th Amendment, not to mention the 14th and 15th, extending citizenship and the right to vote.

As masterfully depicted in the 2012 Steven Spielberg film *Lincoln*, the president used his full political might and ingenuity to ensure that the 13th Amendment—abolishing slavery once and for all—passed in the House of Representatives while the war was still going on. And in his last public address, Lincoln spoke in favor of extending the right to vote to recently emancipated black men just two days after the effective end of the war and just four days before he was assassinated by the racist, pro-slavery actor John Wilkes Booth.

It is for this reason Lincoln is the preeminent political figure in the history of the United States. Those know-nothings who would spit on Lincoln—who deny his fundamental role in the destruction of slavery in the United States and dismiss the key importance of the Emancipation Proclamation as the document that sounded the death knell of slavery for all time—find themselves on the side of the murderer Booth and the forces of political reaction.

On July 4, The World Socialist Web Site will be celebrating the 244th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence by hosting a discussion with five eminent historians, Victoria Bynum, Clayborne Carson, Richard Carwardine, James Oakes and Gordon Wood. They will assess the Revolutions in the context of their times as well as their national and global consequences. We urge our readers to sign up to attend this critical event.

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