

The BLACK C o M M e n t a t o r

An independent weekly internet magazine
dedicated to the movement for economic justice,
social justice and peace - Providing commentary,
analysis and investigations on issues affecting
African Americans and the African world.

www.BlackCommentator.com

Nov 29, 2012 - Issue 496

Cover Story **Lincoln and Race: Not So Simple** **Nafsi ya Jamii** **By Wilson Riles** **BC Columnist**

Stephen Spielberg's movie, *Lincoln*, 'speaks' to the race-consciousness of the nation at a propitious time: when the changing demographics of race-politics are difficult to deny. The first African American President has just won reelection principally by way of the browning of the population, the empowering of young, single women, the visceral revulsion of the racist mannerisms, and the rejection of the plutocratic beliefs of the challenger, Romney. The movie, drawn from historian Doris Kearns Goodwin's book (*Team of Rivals*), focuses on the 1865 Republican-Party-dominated House's passage of the Joint Congressional Resolution for the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution which made slavery illegal everywhere in U.S. territory and beyond the war-powers-dependent Emancipation Proclamation. The juxtaposition of Civil War era antislavery political maneuvering of Republican President Abraham Lincoln and the current racist Republican Party's political maneuverings to oust President Barack Obama is illuminating!

The movie posits Lincoln as a person strongly driven to end slavery by way of the Thirteenth Amendment and glosses over the historical evidence that this was not true of Lincoln during most of his presidency. Artists have a way of 'shaving' the truth to sharpen and heighten the drama. Our emotions are swept up – tears came even to my eyes – and we are entertained. The danger and the problem arises when we seek that same experience from real life and 'shave' the truth – **lie** – about reality or deny the reality that is right in front of us. The facts about race in the U.S. are already drowned so much that the

truth may never be found again. Too many people have died and continue to suffer from these views and false justifications. Abraham Lincoln's position on slavery was much more complicated than Spielberg's movie displays.

In August of 1862 Horace Greely, editor of the influential New York Tribune, wrote an editorial critical of Lincoln's lack of clarity on slavery. In response to the Greely editorial, Lincoln responded as follows: *"My paramount object in this struggle is to save the Union, and is not either to save or to destroy slavery. If I could save the Union without freeing any slave I would do it, and if I could save it by freeing all the slaves I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone I would also do that. What I do about slavery, and the colored race, I do because I believe it helps to save the Union; and what I forbear, I forbear because I do not believe it would help to save the Union. I shall do less whenever I shall believe what I am doing hurts the cause, and I shall do more whenever I shall believe doing more will help the cause."* It is believed that Lincoln had the Emancipation Proclamation in his office desk draw when he wrote this response. These words are contradictory to the antislavery driven mission on display in the movie. These real historical words certainly contradict the actions of the fictional movie Lincoln who **delayed** an offer of peace "to save the Union" from the Confederacy to allow for time to secure sufficient votes in the House to pass the Amendment.

The **Lincoln** movie also makes no reference to the friendship of the President to Frederic Douglas. Douglas, a former enslaved person, first visited Lincoln in the summer of 1863. His intention was to have "colored troops" paid the same as white troops and honored the same for their bravery. Afterward Douglas commented on the gradualism of Lincoln's approach to ending slavery. It was others than the President – Douglas, Thaddeus Stephens, William Lloyd Garrison – who were "on fire" to end slavery. The movie glosses quickly over Lincoln's continuing belief that blacks are generally, ontologically inferior to whites. In later visits Douglas debated with Lincoln on the President's belief that former enslaved persons should be shipped back to Africa because they could not equitably live with whites.

This movie only covers a period of months but there is a hugely important logical piece missing from it. Lincoln's change in motivation for a strong 13th Amendment at the end of his first term is not revealed in light of what we know about his earlier beliefs about slavery and his written motivations for prosecuting the War. This

leaves the historically uninformed viewer to falsely believe that Lincoln was a passionate advocate for abolition all the time. Fooled again!

As the nation is confronted by the race dynamics of the November 6 election; the potentially creative questions and uncertainty that is arising from the now undeniable certainty that we are not in a post-racial era is being filled in and glossed over with fuzzy-edged drama, shallow understandings, lower grade denial, and existential cultural fear. Many of the television news outlets are praising Spielberg's movie, *Lincoln*, for its realistic portrait of Lincoln's political wheeling and dealing. For them the movie gives 'vote buying' and wheeling and dealing a good name. Nasty political values are on display. We should remember that it was Lincoln and the Republicans (in a Congress without advocates for a southern route) who championed the transcontinental railroad that with Federal support lead to the rise of the national railroad barons, progenitors of the corporatist Romney. We should remember the 1862 Dakota Wars where Lincoln diverted troops from the Civil War to Minnesota to fight a six weeks war against Dakota Sioux who rose up because the U.S. had violated an existing treaty; hundreds were killed in the fighting and 38 were executed after five minute trials. But this movie which makes Lincoln a unadulterated antiracist hero will probably receive many awards and make a lot of money.

Some folks in this country will feel that it sufficiently exorcizes the racism demon. Clearly many folks on the Right will point again to the 625,000 Civil War deaths as payment enough for the practice of slavery and that affirmative action has gone on long enough to offset the negative impacts of discrimination. After all, we do have multimillionaire Oprah Winfrey and President Barack Obama. That the Civil War and the 13th and 14th Amendments solved nothing is overlooked; that affirmative action was inadequate from the get-go and was whittled down more from then is forgotten; that the ability of some individuals to achieve "success" has never resulted in any changes **for the group** does not penetrate.

There was great celebration when President Lincoln and his *Team of Rivals* secured the votes to pass the 13th Amendment. It was some months after that that the Civil War ended and the President was assassinated. The Congressional supporters at the time did not believe in true equality, only equality under the law. Most did not believe that the former enslaved should be given the vote and this did not happen *really* for many, many years and is still under threat. The poverty in the African American community is real and deadly. And it still can be

traced to slavery and its discriminatory aftermath. How much longer can we continue to allow dramatic stories, mesmerizing power struggles among the well-to-do, and blaming-the-victim tactics to distract us from the deep engagement that it will take to achieve true equality in this nation.

[Note: Nafsi ya Jamii is the Swahili phrase that translates in English to "The Soul Community"]

BlackCommentator.com Columnist, *Wilson Riles*, is a former Oakland, CA City Council Member. Click [here](#) to contact Mr. Riles.



Copyright © 2002-2012
www.BlackCommentator.com
All Rights Reserved