



## George Bancroft's Civil War: Slavery, Abraham Lincoln, and the Course of History

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GEORGE BANCROFT (1800–1891), widely regarded by his contemporaries as the mid-nineteenth-century's pre-eminent historian as well as a respected elder statesman, faced a practical and interpretative dilemma when the Civil War broke out in April 1861. Like many of his fellow citizens, Bancroft, author of the best-selling *History of the United States* (10 vols., 1834–74), believed that Americans were God's chosen people, blessed with individual liberty and political democracy and ordained by God to spread those ideals to the rest of the world. When hostilities erupted between North and South at Fort Sumter, the American republic and its God-given mission seemed in imminent danger of collapse. Bancroft was convinced that the heart of the problem was the institution of slavery, a national sin that impeded the progress of the United States and compromised its status as an exemplary "city upon a hill," a model Christian republic the rest of the world should strive to emulate. Dedicated to enlightening the public in all the careers he had discarded or adopted—preacher, educator, politician—Bancroft considered his primary profession, historian, to be a prophetic calling that carried with it the responsibility for revealing God's plan to humanity.<sup>1</sup> And so, in this moment of trial, Bancroft offered his services to his president and his nation.

<sup>1</sup> Robert H. Canary, *George Bancroft* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1974), p. 4.

“*Slavery Corrupts the Masters*”

Born in Worcester, Massachusetts, in 1800, George Bancroft graduated from Harvard College and earned a Ph.D. at the University of Göttingen in Germany before he had reached the age of twenty. After a period of professional experimentation, he settled into a career in history and politics. An ardent Jacksonian Democrat, he served as secretary of the navy and then United States minister to Great Britain in the administration of President James K. Polk. Bancroft was best known, however, for his dramatic and uplifting history of the United States.<sup>2</sup>

Like most historians of his era, Bancroft believed that history was nothing less than the unfolding of God's plan for humanity. History was not simply a series of random events caused by human agents but was instead preordained by God and guided by divine providence toward the improvement of mankind through time. “It is the object of the present work,” Bancroft announced in the introduction to the first volume of his *History of the United States*, “to follow the steps by which a favoring Providence, calling our institutions into being, has conducted the country to its present happiness and glory.” Having profited from the lessons of the ancient republics, the Magna Carta, and the Glorious Revolution of 1688, the American republic had embraced the ideals of liberty and democracy to a greater extent than any other nation on earth. The Declaration of Independence, Bancroft claimed, was a perfect expression of political and social principles. “[T]he new republic, as it took its place among the powers of the world,” he explained in the eighth volume of his *History*, “proclaimed its faith in the truth and reality and unchangeableness of freedom, virtue, and right. The heart of Jefferson in writing the declaration, and of congress in adopting it, beat for all humanity; the assertion of right was made for the entire world of mankind, and all coming generations, without any exception whatever.”<sup>3</sup> Bancroft's theology,

<sup>2</sup>The best studies of Bancroft's life are Lilian Handlin, *George Bancroft: The Intellectual as Democrat* (New York: Harper and Row, 1984), and Russel B. Nye, *George Bancroft: Brahmin Rebel* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1944).

<sup>3</sup>George Bancroft, *History of the United States, From the Discovery of the American Continent (1834–74)*, 15th ed., 10 vols. (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company,

philosophy of history, and political ideology merged into a single world view, one that determined how he interpreted the past, present, and future. The collective wisdom of the people, he insisted—not any one individual, not even the revered George Washington or Andrew Jackson—was the force that propelled the nation, and by extension all humanity, toward the ideal state of universal liberty and democracy. As he expressed it in an 1835 oration at Williams College, “the Spirit of God breathes through the combined intelligence of the people.”<sup>4</sup>

Even though Bancroft believed that God’s plan would ultimately be revealed in the trajectory of history, he also believed that humanity could influence its course. The imperfect nature of human beings meant that actions motivated by ignorance, greed, and selfishness could produce what historian Jonathan Tucker Boyd has described as “setbacks” or “detours” in the achievement of the divine intention. Slavery, a morally corrupting force within American society, was just such a roadblock, a national sin powerful enough to destroy the American republic and its status as a specially ordained nation. As stated by historian Edgar Hutchinson Johnson III, “The development of institutional racial slavery among God’s chosen people clearly represented to George Bancroft not only an anomaly, but a threat to the ultimate triumph of the providential plan which . . . called for America to lead humanity to eventual democracy by living example.”<sup>5</sup>

The danger that slavery posed to a republic was one of the topics Bancroft explored in his historical writings. In an article

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1856–74), 1:4, 8:472; Dorothy Ross, “Historical Consciousness in Nineteenth-Century America,” *American Historical Review* 89 (October 1984): 915, 917; Richard C. Vitzthum, “Theme and Method in Bancroft’s *History of the United States*,” *New England Quarterly* 41 (September 1968): 365, 368–69.

<sup>4</sup>George Bancroft, “The Office of the People in Art, Government, and Religion” (originally delivered as an oration to the Adelpi Society of Williams College in 1835), in *Literary and Historical Miscellanies* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1855), pp. 408–35, quotation pp. 424–25; Jonathan Tucker Boyd, “This Holy Hieroglyph: Providence and Historical Consciousness in George Bancroft’s Historiography” (Ph.D. diss., Johns Hopkins University, 1999), pp. 152–54; Edgar Hutchinson Johnson III, “George Bancroft, Slavery, and the American Union” (Ph.D. diss., Auburn University, 1983), pp. 65–66.

<sup>5</sup>Boyd, “This Holy Hieroglyph,” pp. 156–59; Johnson, “Bancroft, Slavery, and the American Union,” pp. 47–48, 75, quotation p. 12.

originally written in 1834 and republished in a collection of essays in 1855, he demonstrated slavery's power for harm with reference to the fall of the Roman empire. In any society, he argued, slavery demeans free labor, the requisite social and economic foundation for individual liberty and political democracy. He praised Tiberius Gracchus, the Roman reformer who invited free laborers to cultivate public lands, thus providing the working masses with much needed economic opportunity and greater dignity. In response, elements of Rome's slaveholding class assassinated Gracchus. The failure to purge slavery from Roman society, according to Bancroft, sparked insurrections and civil wars and eventually allowed for the rise of despotism under Julius Caesar. Refuting the claim that barbarians had overrun Rome, the historian attributed its demise to "the large Roman plantations, tilled by slave labor."<sup>6</sup> The message could not be more obvious: slavery had destroyed one of the world's greatest civilizations; it could do the same to the United States.

In the first volume of his *History of the United States*, Bancroft traced slavery's progress in the Western world from ancient times through the colonization of North America. Despite Western civilization's long history with slavery, its introduction to the New World, he insisted, was an unnatural and anomalous event. Had it not been for the age-old religious conflict between the Christians of Western Europe and the Muslims of North Africa (whom he refers to as "Moors"), slavery would have gradually died away well before the colonization of America. Centuries of religious warfare had fostered mutual bigotry, however, and each side felt justified in enslaving captured enemies. Declaring that "negro slavery is not an invention of the white man," Bancroft argued that the practice had originated in Africa, among the African people, after which it had been transmitted to Europe via the Christian-Muslim religious wars and, later, maritime commerce. Absolving the American colonists of any direct involvement, Bancroft instead

<sup>6</sup>George Bancroft, "Decline of the Roman People," in *Literary and Historical Miscellanies*, pp. 280–317; the essay was originally published as "Slavery in Rome" in the October 1834 issue of the *North American Review*.

blamed greedy European merchants for carrying slavery to Virginia “without regard to the interests or the wishes of the colony.” Yet, an important question remained: Why did the American people allow an institution so obviously incompatible with principles of liberty to endure and expand? The answer, Bancroft suggested, lay in racial difference. “The negro race, from the first, was regarded with disgust, and its union with the whites forbidden under ignominious penalties.” Bigotry, then, and the policies and laws that supported it, led most Americans to view slaves as innately inferior and to accept passively an unwanted situation that was beyond their control.<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, Bancroft’s opposition to slavery proceeded less from a humanitarian concern for the slaves’ suffering than from the institution’s injurious influence on white Southerners. In an 1832 letter to his wife, he wrote, “slavery corrupts the masters. My strongest objection to it is not derived from the degradation and injuries of the blacks; no, it further demoralises the whites, cuts the sinews of industry, dries up the sources of intelligent enterprise and inventive competition, and . . . forms the master to habits of indolent apathy.”<sup>8</sup> Despite his apprehensions about slavery’s negative effects on Southern slaveholders, Bancroft fully subscribed to their paternalistic arguments. “Providence intrusted the guardianship and the education of the colored race” to the planter class, he contended. Arguing that blacks would have remained uncivilized and unproductive in Africa, he declared that the institution of slavery in the American South had served to elevate the African race, civilizing the slaves and making them productive laborers. In his *History*, Bancroft wrote,

The concurrent testimony of tradition represents the negroes, at their arrival [in America], to have been gross and stupid, having memory and physical strength, but undisciplined in the exercise of reason and

<sup>7</sup>Bancroft, *History*, 1:159–78, quotations pp. 159, 165, 177; David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1966), pp. 21–24.

<sup>8</sup>George Bancroft to Sarah Bancroft, 17 January 1832, in M. A. DeWolfe Howe, *The Life and Letters of George Bancroft*, 2 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1908), 1:200.

imagination. Their organization seemed analogous to their barbarism. But, at the end of a generation, all observers affirmed the marked progress of the negro American. In the midst of the horrors of slavery and the slave trade, the masters had, in part at least, performed the office of advancing and civilizing the negro.<sup>9</sup>

Even though his sectional and educational backgrounds set him apart, Bancroft's writings demonstrate that he shared the racial stereotypes of Southern slave owners who were steadily gaining control of his beloved Democratic Party.

### *"I Have Your Anxieties about the Union"*

Bancroft, no abolitionist to be sure, opposed slavery while at the same time strongly supporting the Democratic Party and Democratic presidents Andrew Jackson and James K. Polk, both Tennessee slave owners. Initially, Bancroft could ignore the contradiction because slavery was at best a secondary concern for him. By the 1850s, however, as sectional conflict threatened to tear the nation apart, slavery had emerged as an issue of paramount importance. Bancroft had speculated that if slavery were contained within the Old South, the institution would gradually wither and die, but the prospect of extending slavery into the Kansas territory was endangering that vision. Accurately gauging that the majority of Kansas's settlers were anti-slavery, Bancroft endorsed Senator Stephen Douglas's doctrine of popular sovereignty. If the residents of Kansas were allowed to vote on the issue, Bancroft believed, they would prohibit slavery in their territory, thus settling the matter and easing sectional tensions.<sup>10</sup>

Bancroft's optimism soon gave way to grave concern. Election fraud produced a proslavery victory in Kansas, and contentious debates raged in Congress over what Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts called "The Crime against Kansas." The violent assault on Sumner, Bancroft's friend, by Congressman Preston Brooks of South Carolina in retaliation

<sup>9</sup>Bancroft, *History*, 3:408.

<sup>10</sup>Handlin, *Bancroft: Intellectual as Democrat*, pp. 262–63.

for Sumner's virulent antislavery rhetoric demonstrated the extreme bitterness the issue of slavery engendered on both sides of the debate. Violence in "Bleeding Kansas" escalated as well, resulting in what was essentially a territorial civil war between armed antislavery and proslavery residents. Noting that President Franklin Pierce, a fellow Northern Democrat, had failed to deal with the crisis effectively, Bancroft concluded that proslavery elements within the Democratic Party had compromised the party's integrity and its founding principles, particularly Andrew Jackson's unyielding commitment to the Union. Feeling increasingly alienated from his party, Bancroft denounced extreme proslavery Southerners and their Northern henchmen, Pierce among them.<sup>11</sup> "This cruel attempt to conquer Kansas into slavery is the worst thing ever projected in our history," the historian declared. "Pierce will be handed over to contempt; for posterity will find for him no apology but in the feebleness of his intellect. Statesmen in high places should think a little of the verdict of coming generations."<sup>12</sup>

The election of James Buchanan to the presidency in 1856 briefly rekindled Bancroft's optimism. Buchanan, a Pennsylvanian who had served with Bancroft in Polk's cabinet, held views on slavery that were similar to his own, the historian thought, and the new president would undoubtedly restore the Democratic Party to its true principles. To Bancroft's horror, however, Buchanan, like Pierce, revealed himself to be under the influence of the Southern slave power, a conspiracy of elite slaveholding politicians and their Northern allies who were dedicated to seizing control of America's political system with the goal of defending and extending the institution of slavery and the Southern lifestyle.<sup>13</sup> Bancroft's Democratic Party was the party of Andrew Jackson, a political organization

<sup>11</sup> Handlin, *Bancroft: Intellectual as Democrat*, p. 263; Nye, *Bancroft: Brahmin Rebel*, p. 204. On the slavery issue in Kansas, see James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 145–69.

<sup>12</sup> George Bancroft to William L. Marcy, 24 September 1856, *Life and Letters of George Bancroft*, 2:124.

<sup>13</sup> Handlin, *Bancroft: Intellectual as Democrat*, pp. 263–65; Nye, *Bancroft: Brahmin Rebel*, pp. 204–7. On the slave power conspiracy, see Leonard L. Richards, *The Slave*

dedicated to the Union, territorial expansion, limited federal power, and the preservation of individual liberty for all white men. But Southern subversives had taken over the party and transformed it into a promoter of extreme proslavery views and disunion, an “unproductive hybrid begot by southern arrogance upon northern subserviency.”<sup>14</sup>

In the midst of the intensifying sectional crisis, Bancroft embarked on several trips around the country, including extensive travel in the South. Encountering no proslavery extremists, he wrongly inferred that Southerners were as deeply committed to the Union as he was. Commenting on his travels in Georgia in 1858, he declared, “I found the love of union as strong at the South as at the North.”<sup>15</sup> Bancroft also failed to grasp the true condition of the slaves. He accepted the slaveholders’ argument that slaves were content with their lives and would not choose to leave the plantation even if they could. “[T]he slave loves the air, the Soil, the Sun, the water, of Georgia,” the historian observed, “and will rather spend his earnings [from private cultivation, which Bancroft believed was common in the South] in pleasure than buy his freedom at the cost of [leaving] his sweet native Soil.”<sup>16</sup>

Although he believed that Southern slaves were largely content with their lives, other facets of Southern culture disturbed Bancroft. The elite planter’s lifestyle, he remarked, was characterized by “slatternly ways and laziness,” and the region lacked an “orderly” and “industrious” population. Even though he was essentially blind to the plight of the slaves, Bancroft denounced the institution of slavery as leading to social decay and hindering progress.<sup>17</sup>

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*Power: The Free North and Southern Domination, 1780–1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000).

<sup>14</sup>Joel H. Silbey, *A Respectable Minority: The Democratic Party in the Civil War Era, 1860–1868* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1977), pp. 24–28; Bancroft to Marcy, 24 September 1856, *Life and Letters of George Bancroft*, 2:123.

<sup>15</sup>Handlin, *Bancroft: Intellectual as Democrat*, pp. 261–62; George Bancroft to Lewis Cass, 15 June 1858, George Bancroft Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston. Quotations from the Bancroft Papers by permission of the Massachusetts Historical Society.

<sup>16</sup>Quoted in Johnson, “Bancroft, Slavery, and the American Union,” p. 134.

<sup>17</sup>Johnson, “Bancroft, Slavery, and the American Union,” pp. 135–38.



In the presidential election of 1860, the Democratic Party split along sectional lines. Bancroft proudly voted for the Northern Democratic candidate, Stephen Douglas, judging him to be a potentially Jackson-like leader who would restore the Democratic Party to proper Jacksonian principles and prevent sectional tensions from tearing the country apart. Instead, the historian's worst fears were realized when the Republican candidate, former Illinois congressman Abraham Lincoln, won the election. Two months earlier, Bancroft had predicted, "Our little domestic strife is no more than a momentary disturbance on the surface, easily settled among ourselves. . . . The love of union has wound its cords indissolubly around the whole American people."<sup>18</sup> Lincoln's ascendancy challenged that optimism by exacerbating the sectional disagreement over slavery. But Bancroft would not give in to despair. "I have your anxieties about the union," he wrote to T. C. Amory, "and suffer more than ever before. But I still hope."<sup>19</sup>

The secession of the Southern states, however, shocked Bancroft, and after the Confederacy attacked Fort Sumter on 12 April 1861, he became an ardent supporter of a war to preserve the Union. The American people, acting according to God's plan, would, he believed, rise up and quell the Southern rebellion. Bancroft immediately placed the blame for the crisis on a greedy Southern aristocracy bent on extending slavery across the continent. This elite class of slaveholders, though a minority in the South, had duped middling and poor white Southerners into disunion. Despite his view that slavery had caused the secession crisis, Bancroft's primary concern at the start of the war, like that of most Northerners, was preserving the Union, not freeing the slaves.<sup>20</sup>

Writing in August 1861 from his summer home in Newport, Rhode Island, Bancroft shared his initial views on the war with his friend Henry Hart Milman, a British historian and

<sup>18</sup>Nye, *Bancroft: Brahmin Rebel*, pp. 208–9; Handlin, *Bancroft: Intellectual as Democrat*, p. 267, Bancroft quoted on p. 270.

<sup>19</sup>George Bancroft to T. C. Amory, 28 November 1860, Bancroft Papers, MHS.

<sup>20</sup>Handlin, *Bancroft: Intellectual as Democrat*, pp. 270–73; Nye, *Bancroft: Brahmin Rebel*, pp. 209–10.

clergyman who was serving as the dean of St. Paul's Cathedral in London. The war did not expose any inherent flaw in the American republic, Bancroft argued; rather, it demonstrated that the nation was capable of fending off internal threats to its integrity and survival:

Our rebellion is a proof of the vitality of the republican principles; slavery was an anomaly in a democratic country; as a consequence it has felt itself out of place, and has sought all modes of escape from its inevitable destiny. This outburst does not spring from any element of a free government, and bears witness to the capacity of a nation of the free to govern themselves wisely, peacefully and well. . . . The doctrine of liberty is proved true, by the fact that it will not be reconciled with slavery.<sup>21</sup>

According to Bancroft's analysis, the planter class feared that the South would lose its political influence in Congress if additional free states were admitted to the Union, and so, realizing that the existing Union would never be friendly to their interests, slave power politicians had "deliberately contributed by their policy, towards the election of an avowedly antislavery candidate, in order to have pretext for putting their conspiracy into effect."<sup>22</sup>

A Union victory, in Bancroft's opinion, would be swift. Because "the revolution was effected in every state except South Carolina by a minority," the non-slaveholding majority of Southerners would soon come to their senses, overturn secession, and restore the South to the Union. Moreover, the North enjoyed numerous advantages over the South, including control of the sea, extensive industrial resources, greater wealth, more men of military age, and, perhaps most important, "national sentiments and a sense of right" on their side. The war would not necessarily bring an immediate end to slavery, Bancroft predicted, but there should be no cause for concern. "Slavery will remain, but will cease to reign. Cotton will be cultivated but will

<sup>21</sup>George Bancroft to Henry Hart Milman, 15 August 1861, *Life and Letters of George Bancroft*, 2:133.

<sup>22</sup>Bancroft to Milman, 15 August 1861, 2:134-35, quotation p. 135.

no longer be king.”<sup>23</sup> With its promise for expansion thwarted, slavery would eventually fade away, allowing the United States to return to its mission of spreading freedom to all humanity.

“*We Have a President without Brains*”

In his letter to Milman, Bancroft shared his opinion of the new president. “Mr. Lincoln’s administration came in and was not for the moment equal to the emergency,” he lamented. “Mr. Lincoln’s administration wavered [after secession], seemed even inclined to let them [the Southern states] go.”<sup>24</sup> Bancroft, while traveling through the Midwest in 1854, had met Lincoln in Springfield, Illinois. Although Bancroft had impressed Lincoln, the feeling was not mutual. Bancroft was a New England scholar-politician, a former cabinet member and ambassador who revered Andrew Jackson and had become “the chief intellectual spokesman for the Democratic party.” Lincoln, by contrast, was a self-taught Illinois lawyer and Whig who had served a single, undistinguished term in the U.S. House of Representatives. He lacked the credentials and characteristics that would have inspired Bancroft’s confidence.<sup>25</sup> The historian complained to his wife in September 1861, “We have a president without brains and a cabinet whose personal views outweigh patriotism.” Lincoln “is ignorant, self-willed, & is surrounded by men some of whom are almost as ignorant as himself,” Bancroft opined to his friend Francis Lieber in October 1862. “How hard in order to sustain the country to sustain a man who is incompetent.”<sup>26</sup>

<sup>23</sup>Bancroft to Milman, 15 August 1861, 2:139–42, quotations pp. 139, 141, 142.

<sup>24</sup>Bancroft to Milman, 15 August 1861, 2:136.

<sup>25</sup>Nye, *Bancroft: Brahmin Rebel*, p. 209; Johnson, “Bancroft, Slavery, and the American Union,” pp. 91, 97; quotation from Stewart Winger, “‘To the Latest Generations’: Lincoln’s Use of Time, History, and the End Time, in Historical Context,” *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association* 23 (Summer 2002): 29.

<sup>26</sup>Quoted in Canary, *George Bancroft*, p. 100. Although many Northern politicians initially questioned Lincoln’s qualifications for the presidency, most in time came to respect and admire him as a great statesman (see Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln* [New York: Simon and Schuster, 2005]).

Bancroft had predicted a quick Northern victory, but he feared that Lincoln's "monstrous political imbecility," and the ineptitude of the president's advisors, would prolong the conflict and severely damage the Union. Although the historian retained his faith that the United States would, in time, resume its journey on the road to progress, he worried that the nation might miss the opportunity that God had granted it to purge itself of the sin of slavery. To forestall that calamity, Bancroft initiated a correspondence with Lincoln in November 1861. Armed with his knowledge of history and his status as an elder statesman, Bancroft set out to educate the president about the providential significance of the Civil War.

Your administration has fallen upon times, which will be remembered as long as human events find a record. I sincerely wish to you the glory of perfect success. Civil war is the instrument of Divine Providence to root out social slavery; posterity will not be satisfied with the result, unless the consequences of the war shall effect an increase of Free states. This is the universal expectation and hope of men of all parties.

Bancroft agreed with Lincoln that preserving the Union was the North's chief priority, but he also wanted to be sure that Lincoln understood that the institution of slavery and a divinely inspired republic worthy of emulation were ultimately irreconcilable. Bancroft implored Lincoln to heed the words of his illustrious predecessor, Andrew Jackson, who had faced a similar challenge during the Nullification Crisis of 1832–33: "If slavery and the Union are incompatible, listen to the words that come to you from the tomb of Andrew Jackson—"The Union must be preserved at all hazards.'"<sup>27</sup>

Bancroft's sentiments were not lost on the president. Responding to the historian, Lincoln assured him that he was sympathetic to his views on ending slavery: "The main thought in the closing paragraph of your letter is one which

<sup>27</sup>George Bancroft to Abraham Lincoln, 15 November 1861, Abraham Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/allhtml/malhome.html>, accessed 2 April 2007; *New York Times*, 8 November 1861, enclosed with Bancroft's letter.

does not escape my attention, and with which I must deal in all due caution, and with the best judgment I can bring to it.”<sup>28</sup> Lincoln, like Bancroft, considered slavery an impediment to the nation’s mission of spreading the ideals of liberty and democracy to all nations. In an 1854 speech in Peoria, Illinois, Lincoln had boldly declared, “I hate [slavery] because it deprives our republican example of its just influence in the world—enables the enemies of free institutions, with plausibility, to taunt us as hypocrites—[and] causes the real friends of freedom to doubt our sincerity.”<sup>29</sup>

But Lincoln’s opposition to the peculiar institution, unlike Bancroft’s, recognized the inherent cruelty of slavery. Writing to his close friend Joshua Speed, Lincoln remarked, “I confess I hate to see the poor creatures hunted down, and caught, and carried back to their stripes [whippings], and unrewarded toils; but I bite my lip and keep quiet.” Referring to a steamboat trip the two men had taken from Louisville to St. Louis in 1841, Lincoln recalled that there were about a dozen slaves on board “shackled together with irons.” “That sight was a continual torment to me,” he revealed, “and I see something like it every time I touch the Ohio [River], or any other slave-border.” However, despite his moral opposition to slavery and his humanitarian concern for the suffering of the slaves, Lincoln could not freely express his thoughts (a privilege Bancroft enjoyed); rather, as president, he had to avoid alienating the slaveholding border states as well as those Northern Democrats who supported a war only to preserve the Union, not to liberate the slaves.<sup>30</sup>

Not content simply to write letters, Bancroft traveled to Washington, D.C., in December 1861 to observe the federal government and the Union military forces assembled in the

<sup>28</sup>Abraham Lincoln to George Bancroft, 18 November 1861, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress, accessed 2 April 2007.

<sup>29</sup>Abraham Lincoln, “Speech at Peoria, Illinois,” 16 October 1854, *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Roy P. Basler, 8 vols. (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 2:255.

<sup>30</sup>Abraham Lincoln to Joshua Speed, 24 August 1855, *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 2:320; James M. McPherson, *Abraham Lincoln and the Second American Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 30–31.

capital firsthand. He called at the White House, where he met the president's wife, Mary Todd Lincoln, for the first time. After learning that Bancroft maintained a flower garden at his Newport summer home, Mrs. Lincoln presented him with a bouquet of flowers from the White House conservatory. Bancroft sarcastically commented to his wife Elizabeth, "surely you will think the bouquet must have been magnificent, when I tell you it was a fair counterpart of Mr. Lincoln's brains."<sup>31</sup> Following a one-on-one meeting with the president, Bancroft reported to Elizabeth that Lincoln "thinks slavery has received a mortal wound, that the harpoon has struck the whale to the heart. This I am far from being able to see."<sup>32</sup> Lincoln's comment troubled Bancroft because it suggested that the president would not take aggressive action to ensure that the war ultimately ended slavery. Before his conversation with Lincoln, Bancroft had accepted the likelihood that slavery would survive the war, albeit in a severely weakened form; after the meeting, he began arguing that an immediate goal of the war must be to eliminate slavery.

Bancroft had few good things to say about the political and military leaders he encountered during his visit to Washington. The United States, in his opinion, was "going fast to ruin" in the administration's "incompetent hands." Secretary of State William Seward "looked dirty, rusty, vulgar, and low; used such words as hell, and damn, and spoke very loud. I think better of Mrs. Lincoln for her excessive dislike to him." Following their meeting at the White House, Lincoln escorted Bancroft to General George B. McClellan's headquarters. Despite McClellan's distinguished record at West Point and his close ties to the Democratic Party, Bancroft was not particularly impressed with the "Young Napoleon." "He is one," the historian commented, "who if he thinks deeply keeps his thoughts to himself." Only Salmon P. Chase, the secretary

<sup>31</sup>George Bancroft to Elizabeth Bancroft, 12 December 1861, *Life and Letters of George Bancroft*, 2:144. Elizabeth was Bancroft's second wife; his first wife, Sarah Dwight Bancroft, died in 1837.

<sup>32</sup>George Bancroft to Elizabeth Bancroft, 16 December 1861, *Life and Letters of George Bancroft*, 2:147.

of the treasury, met with Bancroft's approval: "His views are good; his integrity and ability make him the first man in the cabinet." Overall, Bancroft's visit to the nation's capital proved to be a disheartening experience. Images of a seemingly ineffectual president advised by equally inept cabinet secretaries and generals left Bancroft full of anxiety.<sup>33</sup> "Here is our great trouble," he lamented in a letter to his stepson, "a narrow ignorant incompetent President." He concluded, "the President is unhappily for the country—a very weak man."<sup>34</sup>

As the war progressed, Bancroft's private criticism of Lincoln waned as his public support for the president waxed—waxed to such a point that the Republican Party recruited Bancroft, a lifelong Democrat, to run for a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives. The historian politely declined, insisting that he was still a Democrat.<sup>35</sup> However, Bancroft's views on the necessity of abolishing slavery put him at odds with the vast majority of Northern Democrats, who were divided into two main camps during the Civil War. The first group, known as the War Democrats, supported the Lincoln administration's prosecution of the war and favored setting aside political partisanship for the sake of unity until the war was successfully concluded; the second group, known as the Peace Democrats or "Copperheads" (a derogatory term coined by Republicans who compared antiwar Democrats to the poisonous Copperhead snake), sought to end the war immediately through a negotiated settlement with the Confederacy. Copperheads, in the majority, controlled the party's organization, criticized the Lincoln administration's policies and its management of the war effort, and, ultimately, took on the role of a true opposition party.<sup>36</sup> Alienated from the Copperhead majority of the

<sup>33</sup>George Bancroft to Elizabeth Bancroft, 16 December 1861, 2:145–47, quotations pp. 145, 147; George Bancroft to Elizabeth Bancroft, 17 December 1861, *Life and Letters of George Bancroft*, 2:148; Nye, *Bancroft: Brahmin Rebel*, pp. 214–15.

<sup>34</sup>Quoted in Johnson, "Bancroft, Slavery, and the American Union," p. 158.

<sup>35</sup>Nye, *Bancroft: Brahmin Rebel*, pp. 216–17.

<sup>36</sup>Johnson, "Bancroft, Slavery, and the American Union," pp. 161–62. On the Democratic Party during the Civil War, see Silbey, *A Respectable Minority*.

Democratic Party but unwilling officially to join the Republican Party, Bancroft was essentially a man without a party. And so he directed his attention toward helping the nation achieve, when reunited, its providential mission. He redoubled his efforts to ensure that those in authority understood the necessity of ending slavery.

*“This Nation Shall Have a New Birth of Freedom”*

Extending his lobbying beyond Lincoln, Bancroft began corresponding with several of the president's top advisors. In February 1862, he asked Secretary of State Seward to counsel Lincoln to advocate ending slavery in the District of Columbia by constitutional amendment. Such a gesture would serve, in Bancroft's words, “as an advertisement to the world, and to every part of our own country that this is really and essentially a government of the free.” In August, he wrote to Salmon P. Chase. “If your administration makes peace, leaving slavery and the domestic slave-trade existing in Virginia,” Bancroft cautioned, “what will the world, what will the next generation say of you? The boldest measures are the safest; . . . the only way to preserve the Union is by abolishing slavery.”<sup>37</sup>

By the summer of 1862, Lincoln, too, had come to believe that the Union must directly attack slavery. During the 1860 presidential campaign, he had promised not to interfere with slavery where it already existed, only to prevent its further expansion. Seeking to build the broadest possible base of support, he had pursued that policy pragmatically, confident that if he portrayed the war as a battle solely to preserve the Union, the conflict would end quickly and the supremacy of the federal government would be restored in the South. But McClellan's failed Peninsula campaign in Virginia dashed all hopes that the war would be swiftly concluded, and the institution of slavery, Lincoln realized, was sustaining the Confederate war effort. Not only were slaves providing the manpower that

<sup>37</sup>George Bancroft to William H. Seward, 4 February 1862, *Life and Letters of George Bancroft*, 2:150; George Bancroft to Salmon P. Chase, 9 August 1862, *Life and Letters of George Bancroft*, 2:153.



kept Southern plantations up and running, but they were also building fortifications, hauling supplies, cooking meals, and serving as orderlies at army hospitals. Initially, Lincoln tried to gain support for a measure that would provide financial compensation for slave owners who agreed to a program of gradual emancipation. The initiative would be launched in the border states and then, once the Union was restored, would be applied to the seceded states as well. When government officials in the border states rejected the plan, Lincoln realized that he would have to force the matter: he would issue an executive proclamation freeing the slaves in the seceded states first; he would deal with the border states at a later, more politically expedient time. Lincoln first floated his idea on 13 July 1862 while on a carriage ride with Seward and Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles. The South's resiliency, sustained by slave labor, made emancipation "a military necessity absolutely essential for the salvation of the Union," the president insisted.<sup>38</sup>

On 17 July, Congress also moved toward emancipation when it passed a second confiscation bill. The First Confiscation Act, signed into law in 1861, had authorized the United States government to free any slaves whose labor directly served the Confederate military effort. The new confiscation bill was much broader. Declaring that Southern rebels were traitors to the nation, it authorized the United States government to confiscate their property and free their slaves. Lincoln, believing that only the president, through his war powers as commander in chief, could legally emancipate slaves in the rebel states, disputed Congress's authority to free the slaves. He seriously considered vetoing the bill but ultimately signed it, attaching a written statement explaining his objections. The Second Confiscation Act spurred Lincoln to proceed with his own plan. In the words of historian David Herbert Donald,

<sup>38</sup>Goodwin, *Team of Rivals*, p. 462; McPherson, *Abraham Lincoln and the Second American Revolution*, pp. 31–34; Stephen B. Oates, *With Malice Toward None: A Life of Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), pp. 307–9; quotation from *Diary of Gideon Welles, Secretary of the Navy under Lincoln and Johnson*, ed. Howard K. Beale, 3 vols. (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1960), 1:70.

Lincoln decided "to undercut the congressional initiative for emancipation by acting first."<sup>39</sup>

At a cabinet meeting on 22 July, Lincoln read a preliminary draft of his Emancipation Proclamation. Fearing that it might appear to be a desperate measure by a fumbling administration, Seward recommended that Lincoln wait to issue the proclamation until the Union had achieved a major victory on the battlefield. Lincoln quickly saw the wisdom of Seward's position and put the proclamation in a desk drawer for the time being. But he set about preparing Northern public opinion for the eventuality of emancipation. In August, Horace Greeley published an editorial in the *New York Tribune* entitled "The Prayer of Twenty Millions." Sharply criticizing Lincoln's cautious approach to emancipation, Greeley denounced the president's failure to proclaim an end to slavery in accordance with the Second Confiscation Act. Clearly, Greeley argued, it was impossible for the Union to defeat the rebellion and leave slavery intact.<sup>40</sup> Lincoln responded to Greeley in a letter published in newspapers throughout the North. "My paramount object in this struggle *is* to save the Union," he wrote, "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." Lincoln had chosen his words carefully. By identifying the preservation of the Union as his "paramount object," he appealed to Northerners committed only to saving the Union. But in naming the Union as his "paramount," not his *only*, concern, he left the door open for emancipation, thus appealing to antislavery Northerners.<sup>41</sup>

In September 1862, the Union victory at Antietam opened the door for Lincoln to issue his preliminary Emancipation

<sup>39</sup>Goodwin, *Team of Rivals*, pp. 460–61; David Herbert Donald, *Lincoln* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), pp. 364–65, quotation p. 365.

<sup>40</sup>Goodwin, *Team of Rivals*, p. 471; Donald, *Lincoln*, pp. 365–66, 368.

<sup>41</sup>Abraham Lincoln to Horace Greeley, 22 August 1862, *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 5:388; Donald, *Lincoln*, pp. 368–69.

Proclamation, which declared that all slaves in the seceded states (with the exception of designated areas under Union military control) would be freed if those states did not put down their weapons and rejoin the Union by 1 January 1863. No state responded to the ultimatum, and the Emancipation Proclamation went into effect as directed. Although the executive order freed the slaves in the rebel states (with the exception of slaves in Tennessee, much of which was under Union control, and Union-occupied areas of Virginia and Louisiana), it exempted those in the border states.<sup>42</sup> Bancroft, who had been urging emancipation for months, was not satisfied. A simple presidential decree was not sufficient to destroy an institution as deeply rooted as slavery, he insisted.

In thinking of the future, I feel unwilling to rely on the President's proclamation alone for the termination of slavery. Congress has power to make all laws that are necessary to the exercise of its constitutional office. Now slavery has proved itself a deadly enemy to our institutions; is it not then rightfully a subject for legislation? Could not Congress enact, that henceforward every one born in one common country should be born free?<sup>43</sup>

In the end, Bancroft decided that only a constitutional amendment had the necessary legal force to ensure the end of slavery.

Although Bancroft and Lincoln hailed from different backgrounds and embraced different political ideologies, their views concerning the providential nature of the Civil War were similar. This fact, more than anything else, explains why Bancroft's private criticism of Lincoln faded over time while his support and respect for Lincoln grew. Lincoln expressed their shared view in his famous address at the dedication of the Soldiers' Cemetery at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, on 19 November 1863. Lincoln proposed that the Battle of Gettysburg was significant not only for Americans but for all people. The world wanted to know if a nation "conceived in Liberty and dedicated to the

<sup>42</sup> Abraham Lincoln, "Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation," 22 September 1862, *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 5:433–36; Abraham Lincoln, "Emancipation Proclamation," 1 January 1863, *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 6:28–30.

<sup>43</sup> George Bancroft to Robert Schenck, 18 November 1863, Bancroft Papers, MHS.

proposition that all men are created equal" could survive the ordeal of civil war. The Civil War was a testing ground to determine whether a political experiment based on freedom could endure in a world still dominated by monarchy and aristocracy. Largely because it had tolerated slavery, the founding generation had failed to achieve the equality Thomas Jefferson had so eloquently articulated in the Declaration of Independence. And so it was left to future generations of Americans to secure that ideal, an ideal Union soldiers at Gettysburg had died defending. As a result of the war, Lincoln declared, "this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom."<sup>44</sup> Bancroft, clearly impressed with the speech, asked Lincoln to prepare a handwritten copy of it for facsimile reproduction in a book entitled *Autograph Leaves of Our Country's Authors*. Lincoln complied, but because he had written on both sides of the paper, the manuscript could not be reproduced. When informed of the problem, Lincoln wrote out another copy of the address, this time on only one side of the paper, and that version has since served as the standard text for the Gettysburg Address.<sup>45</sup>

The presidential election of 1864 was crucial for the country, and it was crucial for Bancroft. The Democrats nominated General George B. McClellan, who had failed to impress Bancroft during their meeting in December 1861. In an attempt to appeal to as many voters as possible, the Democrats had balanced their nomination of a prominent general with the adoption of a peace platform that sharply criticized Lincoln's wartime suppression of civil liberties and, under the banner of states' rights, supported the preservation of slavery in the United States. Civil War historian James M. McPherson has asserted that the Democratic platform "made peace the first

<sup>44</sup>Abraham Lincoln, "Gettysburg Address," 19 November 1863, *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 7:22–23; Winger, "To the Latest Generations," p. 34; Garry Wills, *Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words that Remade America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), pp. 54, 87, 102–3; Phillip Shaw Paludan, "A People's Contest": *The Union and Civil War, 1861–1865*, 2nd ed. (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1996), p. 371.

<sup>45</sup>Lincoln, "Gettysburg Address," *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 7:22, nn. 31, 32; Abraham Lincoln to George Bancroft, 29 February 1864, *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 7:212.

priority and Union a distant second.” The Republican, or “National Union,” platform called for the war to continue until the “unconditional surrender” of the Confederacy had been achieved. Most important for Bancroft, it also advocated a constitutional amendment to abolish slavery in the United States. On election day, Bancroft voted for Lincoln.<sup>46</sup>

Both Lincoln and Bancroft feared that the Emancipation Proclamation, a wartime measure, would be overturned once the conflict ended. An antislavery amendment to the federal Constitution would settle the issue and ensure that slavery could never be reestablished in the United States. “It is the part of justice. It is the part of peace,” Bancroft wrote to Congressman Samuel S. Cox. “[N]othing else will quiet the South; when the matter is fixed, they will see what they must renounce and will acquiesce. The measure is the only one which can restore prosperity to the South; punish slavery, and then we can cherish the former slaveholder.” Writing as Congress was debating such an amendment, Bancroft lobbied Cox on the economic benefits to be gained. “[R]emove slavery,” he declared, “and the tide of free labor will rush towards the South with a surprising swiftness. In ten years Virginia will be more peopled and richer than she ever was before. Texas will be our Italy. . . . The path of wisdom, of patriotism, of peace, of future success, leads now through the abolition of slavery by an amendment of the Constitution.”<sup>47</sup>

### “*He Clung Fast to the Hand of the People*”

A month after Lincoln’s second inauguration, actor and staunch Confederate sympathizer John Wilkes Booth assassinated the president as he sat in the presidential box at Ford’s Theatre in Washington, D.C. Almost immediately, Bancroft set out to assess Lincoln’s importance to history or, more accurately, to the historian’s own providential interpretation of

<sup>46</sup>McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, pp. 716–17, 771–72, quotation p. 772; Nye, *Bancroft: Brahmin Rebel*, pp. 224–25.

<sup>47</sup>Goodwin, *Team of Rivals*, p. 686; George Bancroft to Samuel S. Cox, 18 January 1865, *Life and Letters of George Bancroft*, 2:157–58.

history. According to Bancroft, certain individuals were instrumental in furthering America's progress as a nation and, by extension, in the unfolding of God's plan for humanity. His characterization of such historical heroes was lofty:

the name of those who . . . have assisted to raise the world from the actual toward the ideal, is repeated in all the temples of humanity, and lives not only in its intelligence, but in its heart. These are they, whose glory calumny cannot tarnish, nor pride beat down. Connecting themselves with man's advancement, their example never loses its lustre; and the echo of their footsteps is heard throughout all time with sympathy and love.

Bancroft believed that historical heroes—men like John Smith, William Penn, Benjamin Franklin, and especially George Washington—were evidence of God's favor. They appeared at the right place at the right time to make a significant contribution to humanity's development. In "The Place of Abraham Lincoln in History," published in the *Atlantic Monthly* two months after the assassination, Bancroft considered whether the recently deceased president should be included in that pantheon.<sup>48</sup>

The bulk of Bancroft's essay explored the history of American slavery and the politics surrounding it from the colonial period through the Civil War. In his analysis of Lincoln, Bancroft depicted the president as ill prepared for confronting the greatest crisis in the nation's history. A "man of defective education" who knew "nothing of administration beyond having been master of a very small post office," Lincoln was ignorant of military affairs, lacked eloquence as a speaker, and was "unskilled in the use of the pen." Bancroft then proceeded to discuss Lincoln's struggle against the slave power of the South:

And this man was summoned to stand up directly against a power with which Henry Clay had never directly grappled, before which Webster

<sup>48</sup>Vitzthum, "Theme and Method in Bancroft's *History*," pp. 366, 369, 377–78; Ross, "Historical Consciousness in Nineteenth-Century America," p. 915; George Bancroft, "The Necessity, the Reality, and the Promise of the Progress of the Human Race" (originally delivered as an oration to the New-York Historical Society in 1854), in *Literary and Historical Miscellanies*, p. 488.

at last had quailed, which no President had offended and yet successfully administered the government, to which each great political party had made concessions, to which in various measures of compromise the country had repeatedly capitulated, and with which he must now venture a struggle for the life or death of the nation.<sup>49</sup>

Although the historian declared the Emancipation Proclamation to be Lincoln's great contribution to history, Bancroft did not portray Lincoln as one of history's great leaders. The president was instead, as Bancroft portrayed him, merely an agent of the collective wisdom of the people and, as Lincoln himself understood, an instrument of God's will. As Lincoln had commented concerning the success of the Union cause, "The nation's condition God alone can claim." Because of Lincoln's distinctive ability to represent the will of the people as reflected in his proclamation ending slavery, America's "great principles of personal equality and freedom . . . will undulate through the world like the rays of light and heat from the sun."<sup>50</sup> Lincoln, despite his personal flaws, was able to restore the American republic to the fulfillment of its providential mission as a beacon of freedom and democracy.

A year after Lincoln's death, Bancroft was chosen by a special congressional committee to deliver a memorial address before a joint session of Congress. He used the opportunity to develop further his views on Lincoln's status as a historical figure and to reflect on the Civil War's importance as a historical event. Bancroft began by tracing the development of the American republic as the gradual fulfillment of humanity's progress toward the ideals of liberty and democracy. The founding generation had understood the sin of slavery but had been unable to weaken the institution's hold on the new nation. With the passing of great statesmen like Washington and Jefferson, a new generation of Southern leaders proclaimed slavery to be a positive good rather than a national tragedy.

<sup>49</sup>George Bancroft, "The Place of Abraham Lincoln in History," *Atlantic Monthly*, June 1865, pp. 762–63.

<sup>50</sup>Bancroft, "The Place of Lincoln in History," pp. 763–64.

These proslavery Southerners had found legal support for their cause in the Supreme Court's ruling in the Dred Scott case.<sup>51</sup>

Bancroft emphasized Lincoln's humble, log-cabin origins and depicted him as "a child of nature" rising from obscurity to deal with the national crisis over secession: "with no experience whatever as an executive officer, while States were madly flying from their orbit, and wise men knew not where to find counsel, this descendent of Quakers, this pupil of Bunyan, this offspring of the great West, was elected President of America." As historian Richard Nelson Current has observed, Bancroft believed that "Providence intervened through natural (that is, divine) laws, through the universal mind, through the common people who partook of that mind, through the great men who embodied the idea and represented the people." A great man of history was one who "lived close to nature and, from it, learned the lessons that enabled him to represent the people, to personify the national character, and to do the historic work of God." George Washington and Andrew Jackson were, in Bancroft's estimation, the country's supreme leaders. Although Lincoln had not achieved their stature, he was certainly the Civil War era's most notable hero.<sup>52</sup>

Again, Bancroft stressed that Lincoln's fundamental virtue was that he had so brilliantly represented the will of the people. Indeed, Lincoln understood as much, having once said to a crowd in Indiana, "I am but an accidental, temporary instrument; it is your business to rise up and preserve the Union and liberty." Judging that Lincoln's "supervision of [public] affairs was unsteady and incomplete," Bancroft praised the strength of the people, not Lincoln's leadership, for the Union's victory in the war. "The President was led along by the greatness of their [Northerners'] self-sacrificing example," the historian explained, "and as a child, in a dark night, . . . catches hold

<sup>51</sup>George Bancroft, *Memorial Address on the Life and Character of Abraham Lincoln* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1866), pp. 4–16.

<sup>52</sup>Bancroft, *Memorial Address*, pp. 16–18, quotations pp. 17, 18; Richard Nelson Current, *Speaking of Abraham Lincoln: The Man and His Meaning for Our Times* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983), pp. 174–75, 184–85, quotations pp. 174, 175.



of the hand of its father for guidance and support, he clung fast to the hand of the people, and moved calmly through the gloom." Bancroft concluded his address by affirming that, "The disturbances in the country grew not out of anything republican, but out of slavery, which is a part of the system of hereditary wrong; and the expulsion of this domestic anomaly opens to the renovated nation a career of unthought-of dignity and glory. Henceforth our country has a moral unity as the land of free labor."<sup>53</sup> In the end, despite having acknowledged Lincoln's role in bringing the Civil War to a just conclusion, Bancroft failed to appreciate fully Lincoln's considerable skills as a politician and a wartime commander in chief.<sup>54</sup>

With the end of the war, Bancroft hoped that the Democratic Party would be restored to Jacksonian principles and regain control of the federal government. "Do away with slavery," Bancroft predicted, "and the Democrats will be borne into power on the wings of their sound principles of finance." Though saddened by Lincoln's death, Bancroft viewed Andrew Johnson's elevation to the presidency as promising because Johnson, like Bancroft, was an ardent Jacksonian and Unionist.<sup>55</sup> In 1867, Johnson offered Bancroft the position of United States minister to Prussia. Having accepted, Bancroft was out of the country during the contentious Reconstruction era, although he did monitor events at a distance with growing concern. Returning to the United States in the mid-1870s, Bancroft retired from politics and devoted his remaining years to historical research and writing.

As historian Richard C. Vitzthum has commented, Bancroft's goal was "always to find for every event a meaning consistent with his grand design."<sup>56</sup> Writing in 1883, Bancroft reflected on the aftermath of the Civil War.

<sup>53</sup>Bancroft, *Memorial Address*, pp. 19, 35, 46, 50.

<sup>54</sup>Current, *Speaking of Abraham Lincoln*, pp. 182, 185.

<sup>55</sup>Bancroft to Cox, 28 January 1865, *Life and Letters of George Bancroft*, 2:157; Handlin, *Bancroft: Intellectual as Democrat*, pp. 282–83; Nye, *Bancroft: Brahmin Rebel*, pp. 225–26.

<sup>56</sup>Vitzthum, "Theme and Method in Bancroft's *History*," p. 370.

As you go south the most wonderful fact that will arrest your attention is: that of the millions at the south who twenty four years ago were ready to set the world on fire to preserve & extend the institution of slavery, you will not now find one who wishes it back again. This was not brought about by the wealth of the north, or its learning; but by the wisdom & energy & immortal will of our people.<sup>57</sup>

Although Bancroft was excessively optimistic and more than a little naïve about the South's adjustment to life after slavery, the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution, ratified in December 1865, had abolished slavery in the United States. That was all that mattered to Bancroft. America had endured the trial imposed by God, and, free from the taint of slavery, it could now proceed on with its mission to spread the virtues of liberty, democracy, and the free labor system throughout the world.

Lincoln's essence as a leader was perhaps best captured not by George Bancroft but by Leo Tolstoy. Lincoln's stature, according to Tolstoy, emanated from his "peculiar moral power" and "the greatness of his character." Tolstoy continued,

Washington was a typical American. Napoleon was a typical Frenchman, but Lincoln was a humanitarian as broad as the world. He was bigger than his country—bigger than all the Presidents together. We are still too near to his greatness, but after a few centuries more our posterity will find him considerably bigger than we do. His genius is still too strong and too powerful for the common understanding, just as the sun is too hot when its light beams directly on us.<sup>58</sup>

In considering Lincoln's leadership, Bancroft, the preeminent American historian of his time, had been blinded by the sun. Searching desperately for evidence of God's hand and the people's will in his providential view of history, Bancroft had missed the obvious. He had failed to account for the political and military decisions, carefully considered and skillfully carried out, of a truly gifted statesman.

<sup>57</sup>George Bancroft to Matthew Arnold, 26 December 1883, Bancroft Papers, MHS.

<sup>58</sup>Quoted in Goodwin, *Team of Rivals*, p. 748.

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