13th Annual Lincoln Legacy Lectures: Lincoln and Voting Rights

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“Voting Rights and the Meaning of Freedom: The View from the Civil War Era”

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Lecture Synopsis

2015 is not only the 50th anniversary of the Voting Rights Act. It is also the 150th anniversary of the most significant rewriting ever of the U.S. Constitution: the addition of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments, which secured freedom, citizenship, and voting rights. The voting rights granted were limited, to be sure: women were still denied the vote, and the administration of voting procedures was left to the states. Yet the enfranchisement of African American men still represented the most notable achievement of the Civil War era.

In no country but the United States was there such a rapid evolution from the abolition of slavery to voting rights for freed men. At all times in this evolution, lawmakers and ordinary Americans contemplated the relation between freedom and the right to vote. By 1870, a remarkable consensus had emerged. Not only was voting to be regarded as a right belonging to all male citizens; it was to be protected by the full force of the U.S. army. Indeed, as events of the early 1870s revealed, U.S. authorities came to regard interference in voting as an act of terror to be combated by federal troops.

This special regard for voting has sometimes been forgotten because of the disfranchisement movements of the late 1800s and early 1900s, movements that ultimately required a new foundation of suffrage: the Voting Rights Act of 1965. This lecture recovers that remarkable moment of the post-Civil War era when Americans were so committed to voting rights that they were willing to deploy the army against the disfranchisers in a 19th century version of the War on Terror.