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Was Abraham Lincoln Gay? Homosexuality and History

What are we to make of Abraham Lincoln? This larger-than-life figure that has cast such an enduring shadow over American history continues to defy historical analysis. The so-called "Lincoln Myth" that emerged shortly after his assassination in 1865 continues as the nation's central memory to this day. The most interesting debate over Lincoln and his legacy has been conducted by a cadre of conservative scholars who have debated Lincoln's real convictions on slavery and his real goal in preserving the union.

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At least that was true until now. With the release of *The Intimate World of Abraham Lincoln* by C. A. Tripp, a new question has emerged as a matter of historical interest and immediate media scrutiny. Why? Because C. A. Tripp argues that Abraham Lincoln was "predominantly homosexual."

Welcome to the high-octane world of revisionist history. For years, the field of academic history has been lurching into the ditch of historical revisionism, with various researchers and writers—most hoping for tenure at a major university—pursuing the sex lives of various historical personages, looking for "transgression" and scandal.

Beyond this, a group of homosexual advocates has been ransacking history, looking for traces of homosexuality in major historical figures. Their agenda is clear—to argue for the normalization of homosexuality by suggesting that some of history's most preeminent figures were actually closeted (or not so closeted) homosexuals.

The release of *The Intimate World of Abraham Lincoln* caught the immediate attention of the national media. Reviews quickly appeared in major newspaper and newsmagazines, with some reviewers immediately gushing about the "refreshing" analysis offered by the book's author, the late C. A. Tripp. Larry Kramer, a prominent writer and AIDS activist, told *The New York Times* that the book "will change history." He certainly hopes so, and his hope is shared by many in the homosexual movement who would eagerly argue that a homosexual Abraham Lincoln should be a model for the normalization of homosexuality itself.

Andrew Sullivan, a prominent homosexual advocate and political commentator, quickly celebrated the book as a great work of scholarship. Even acknowledging the book's lack of clear historical evidence, Sullivan is undeterred. "Certainly if you're looking for clear evidence of sexual relationships between men in Lincoln's time in the official historical record, you'll come to the conclusion that no one was gay in the nineteenth century. But of course, many were." Of course, this is simply not an argument. What Sullivan is really arguing is that the lack of historical evidence should not deter modern interpreters from arguing for a homosexual Lincoln.

Sullivan bases his claim on the following argument. "Here's what I'd say are the most persuasive facts. Lincoln never developed deep emotional relations with any women, including his wife. Even the few snippets we have of early romances or his deeply strained courtship of Mary Todd suggest a painful attempt to live up to social norms, not a regular heterosexual life. His marriage was a disaster, by all accounts." What in the world does Sullivan really mean when he simply asserts that Lincoln did not have "a regular heterosexual life?" History is replete with men who had unhappy marriages, but that hardly made them homosexual.

C. A. Tripp died before *The Intimate World of Abraham Lincoln* was published. The brief biological data supplied on the book's jacket provides only a hint of Tripp's real background and agenda. The jacket identifies Tripp as, "A psychologist, therapist, and sex researcher, [who] worked with Alfred Kinsey in the late 1940s and 1950s before obtaining a Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology from New York University. He maintained a private practice of psychology for years and taught at the State University of New York, Downstate Medical Center, from 1955 to 1964."

That doesn't even come close to telling the story. In reality, Tripp was a close associate of Alfred Kinsey, and he was deeply involved in Kinsey's various experiments and eroticisms packaged to the public as sexual "research." In one infamous case, Tripp was involved in soliciting young men from the streets of New York City to commit sex acts on film. Tripp hired a boy hustler who then solicited other young men for Kinsey and Tripp's sex experiments. By the end of the "experiment," over 2,000 young men had participated in the filmed sex acts.

Like Kinsey, Tripp was a deeply troubled man. He later would become author of *The Homosexual Matrix*, and would emerge as a major figure in the homosexual movement.

Writing in *The New Republic*, Christine Stansell, Professor of History at Princeton University, explains that "Tripp was determined to rescue a hidden gay hero." The facts would simply be twisted in order to serve Tripp's agenda.

Any careful scholar would have to acknowledge that Abraham Lincoln developed very close relationships with other men. This was especially true with respect to Joshua Speed, with whom Lincoln shared a bed for several years. The two were undoubtedly close friends, but the experience of sharing a bed was hardly unusual in the nineteenth century. Tripp simply reads a homoerotic or homosexual meaning into virtually every word Lincoln did or did not say about Joshua Speed. As Stansell explains, this allowed Tripp "to infer helter-skelter, wrenching the evidence in line to make the case."

In the end, Stansell concluded that Tripp had compiled "a dossier of ambiguities—not truths, but ambiguities—worth considering." As she continued, "His bullish proclamations are easily countered, and not just by the heterosexuals and the homophobes whose attacks he predicts will result from his revelations."

Stansell deals with the evidence honestly. "It mostly comes down to this: what did it really mean for people to sleep together in small beds? The practice was habitual, a convention of friendship and comradeship. Travelers piled in with each other at ends; siblings routinely shared beds; women friends often slept with each other as readily on an overnight visit as they took their tea together in the kitchen—and sometimes displaced husbands to do so." With a flourish, Stansell reflects, "Historians who care about such things argue about them."

Tripp actually went much further in terms of the specifics of his argument. Using psychoanalysis and his twisted reading of history, Tripp attempted to paint a picture of Abraham Lincoln as a tortured and closeted homosexual, whose deep friendships with men like Joshua Speed and Captain David Derickson were both homoerotic and homosexual. Tripp even argues that he can find references to specific homosexual acts in Lincoln's history. At the very least, Tripp should be credited with a strangely perverse form of creativity.

The real background to Tripp's book was revealed in a January 17, 2005 cover story published in *The Weekly Standard*. In that article, writer Philip Nobile described the book as "a dishonest book about Honest Abe."

In reality, Nobile, who teaches history at the Cobble Hill School of American Studies in New York, was in a most unique position to criticize the book. It turns out that he had originally been Tripp's co-author for the work. Offended by Tripp's recklessness, Nobile later withdrew from the project. "The book is a hoax and a fraud," Nobile now argues, "a historical hoax because the inaccurate parts are all shaded toward a predetermined conclusion, and a literary fraud, because significant portions of the accurate parts are plagiarized—from me, as it happens."

The story Nobile relates is fascinating. "Tripp and I intended to be co-authors of the book, laboring together on the project from 1995 to 2000—when our partnership, already fissured by dueling manuscripts, came to a bitter end. We quarreled constantly over the evidence: I said the Gay Lincoln Theory was intriguing but impossible to prove; he said it was stone-cold fact."

Nobile's expose of the book is must reading for anyone inclined to take Tripp's "research" seriously. He cites a

disparaging comment made by respected author David Donald—himself a major Lincoln biographer—with regard to Tripp’s book. As Donald wrote to Tripp, “Throughout you seem to be neglecting the fundamental rule, the historian has to rely on facts . . . I don’t mean to discourage you from doing further work—but I do think it ought to be more systematic and more empirical.”

In the book, Tripp argued that Lincoln’s homosexuality can be traced to his early puberty. Tripp’s early dating of Lincoln’s puberty is, according to Nobile, “the most important ‘smoking gun’ in the whole gay Lincoln arsenal.” The importance of early puberty in males was a central concern of Alfred Kinsey, who argued that precocious puberty is linked to a higher sex drive and experience or experimentation with homosexuality.

Setting aside the dubious character of Kinsey’s argument, the noteworthy issue is that Tripp was so determined to argue for Lincoln’s precocious puberty, that he ended up arguing that Lincoln went through puberty at age nine—an absolutely remarkable and medially unsustainable argument for a boy in the nineteenth century. As Nobile acknowledges, nothing justifies this claim. Of course, that didn’t stop Tripp.

Concerned about the obvious errors in Tripp’s book, and outraged at Tripp’s plagiarism of his own written materials, Nobile contacted Tripp’s publisher, The Free Press. Nobile’s argument with the publisher—thoroughly reported in his Weekly Standard article—makes for fascinating reading. In the end, Nobile’s protests and demands were not satisfied.

Interestingly, the February 21, 2005 issue of U.S. News & World Report includes a major cover story entitled “Lincoln Revealed,” by Justin Ewers. As the magazine’s cover summarizes the story, the gay issue is foreclosed. “Passionate? More than you ever knew. Troubled? Oh yeah. Big time. Gay? Nah, forget about it.”

As Ewers explains, “The rough outlines of Lincoln’s life before the White House have never been in dispute.” He rejects C. A. Tripp’s argument, noting that Tripp is “flatly wrong” in several claims. Ewers cites David Donald as stating the obvious: “I simply cannot believe that, if the early relationship between Joshua Speed and Lincoln had been sexual, the president of the United States would so freely and publicly speak of it.”

This amounts to what I would call a “common sense” theory of history. It is simply impossible to believe and implausible to claim that a figure as controversial and preeminent as Abraham Lincoln could have engaged in homosexual relationships as characterized by C. A. Tripp without that fact becoming scandalous, notorious, and eventually disastrous. This book is a scandalous effort to twist history into service for a political cause—not that such an effort would be unprecedented. Abraham Lincoln was undoubtedly a complex, confusing, and often deeply troubled figure. But then, he lived and led in deeply troubled times.

C. A. Tripp’s book tells us a great deal about Tripp, but very little about Lincoln. It reveals the true agenda of revisionists in the academy who will use history as fodder for political movements and will twist the historical record for their own purposes.

Is there more to learn about Abraham Lincoln? Undoubtedly. But was Abraham Lincoln gay? In the words of U.S. News & World Report, “Nah, forget about it.”

