The black colonization project fits awkwardly within the historiography of the U.S. Civil-War era. In 1816, the American Colonization Society (ACS) established itself as the most prominent organization to promote sending freed African Americans to Africa as a political safety valve to alleviate mounting domestic racial pressures. For its proponents, a motley mixture of antislavery and proslavery advocates, the founding of the U.S. colony of Liberia in the early 1820s made the scheme all the more feasible.1 Colonization advocates remained active when the Republican Party came into being in the 1850s. Abraham Lincoln, among other prominent Whig-Republicans, supported black colonization throughout his political career.

Considering the impressive number of histories and hagiographies written about Lincoln, it should come as little surprise that those few studies that have examined the Civil-War era colonization scheme in any detail focus their attention on “Honest Abe.”2 According to Sebastian Page, this tendency has led historians to saddle “their analysis with an unhelpful moral import, and steering it toward optimistic claims that Lincoln either insincerely peddled colonization to calm white racism, or, at worst, renounced the measure through the war” (362). Aside from Lincoln himself, the other main historical casualty of the Lincoln-centric narrative, Page attests, is William Henry Seward, Lincoln’s Secretary of State from 1861 to 1865.


Page therefore uses Seward to explore the tensions between black colonization, domestic politics, and Civil-War diplomacy in order to address some intriguing questions: How might an examination of Seward alongside Lincoln complement or challenge our understanding of black colonization and Civil War foreign relations? Did Seward’s position on colonization change over time? And did the issue of colonization create divisions between Lincoln and Seward? Page has been tackling aspects of these questions head-on for some time now, including in his provocative co-authored book (with Philip Magness), *Colonization after Emancipation: Lincoln and the Movement for Black Resettlement.* Now Page emphasizes how Seward’s antagonism to colonization even while secretary of state contrasted with Lincoln’s continued support for it as president. The common historical portrayal of Seward and Lincoln seeing eye-to-eye on issues of race relations and emancipation—and of Seward as Lincoln’s loyal deputy—makes the divisiveness between the two concerning colonization all the more remarkable. The article therefore is a useful addition to the growing literature on Seward, Civil-War foreign relations, and the nineteenth-century colonization project.

Lincoln and Seward left a sparse paper trail on the colonization issue. As a result, “sources in foreign archives,” Page notes, “shed the most light on Lincoln and Seward’s differences over colonization” (363). Page’s use of American, Danish, Dutch, and British sources demonstrates an innovative mining of international archives. It also shows how proposed U.S. colonization schemes involved a remarkable number of European states attracted by the prospect of bolstering their own colonies’ labor pools with African-American emigrants. A wide range of proposed emigration destinations crossed Seward’s state department desk, among them British Honduras (Belize), British Guiana (Guyana), Mexico, Costa Rica, Colombia, Guatemala, Haiti, and Brazil, alongside Liberia. The sources themselves are treated with care, providing a nuanced study of Seward’s shifting views on black colonization.

Page persuasively shows the pragmatism of Secretary of State Seward’s antagonism to colonization. While part of Seward’s opposition to colonization no doubt stemmed from his abolitionist ideology, the preponderance of evidence gathered here suggests his primary motivation stemmed more from an aversion to paperwork; “the impractical logistics of mass resettlement” (364); a desire to cut government expenses; that “for Seward, few considerations trumped the United States’ want of population” (365); and Seward’s desire to limit congressional debate on the subject so as to avoid senatorial rejection of any proposed colonization project, which would have been embarrassing for the administration.

The article’s evidence is less persuasive in supporting Page’s contention that Seward was “always opposed to colonization in principle” (364). Indeed, Page grants that racial homogeneity had some appeal to Seward.

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And if ever there was a time when Seward might have publically demonstrated his principled opposition to colonization, it would have been in the years preceding his stint as secretary of state: and thus before he would have been expected to officially toe President Lincoln’s line in favor of colonization. Yet we instead find ample evidence of Seward’s antebellum endorsement of colonization. Seward’s presentation in the 1850s of “a petition that included colonization as part of a larger emancipation scheme” (369); his offer to Frank Blair, one of the key advocates of colonization within the fledgling Republican Party, to be Seward’s vice presidential running mate in 1860; and Seward’s alleged admission in early 1860 “that he rejoices in the Colonization Scheme” (370) all call into question how principled Seward really was on the issue. However, this does little to detract from Page’s resourceful article, which refreshingly illustrates how the colonization project continues to provide new and innovative ways for traversing the well-worn paths of Civil-War political and diplomatic history.

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