

Lincoln: Spielberg comes up short by exploiting southern stereotypes

By David R. Altman,
Progress contributor

So, after all the fanfare and the anticipation, the movie *Lincoln* turned out to be short of extraordinary. Believe what you have read about the performance of Daniel Day-Lewis: it was unforgettable. As you think about certain public figures, you can't help but associate them with the actors who 'became' them. Clearly, you will no longer be able to look at a picture of Lincoln (and I have one hanging above this keyboard) without thinking of the extraordinary portrayal by Day-Lewis.

This movie appears to have everything going for it, including being directed by Steven Spielberg whose films have generated more than \$8 billion dollars and won him two Academy Awards. It has an extraordinary cast, which includes Tommy Lee Jones and Sally Fields.

They also had a subject matter that was taken from a best-selling book by Pulitzer Prize winner Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln*. Not a bad line-up.

The movie itself dealt with a small section of that book that focused on Lincoln's obsession with passage of the 13th amendment, which abolished slavery in the United States. The entire film took place during the final four months of his presidency. While the movie was incredibly well-done, it lapsed into what we so often see as somewhat predictable, interpretative storytelling and it gave in to the all-too-easy portrayal of the South as not only unlikeable, but downright evil.

According to Kearns-Goodwin, Spielberg told her well before she started the book that he wanted to buy the film rights once it was published. He was anxious to tell the story of the fight over the 13th amendment. And this is what he did. While this film was about Lincoln, it will be remembered by some for Spielberg's decision to (predictably and unfortunately) use his film to portray negative Southern character stereotyping that we have almost come to expect from so many films (the Banjo Boy in *Deliverance* and the 'Captain' in *Cool Hand Luke* come to mind). But instead of giving us the magic (and balance) of Ken Burn's masterpiece *The Civil War* or the human complexities of *Gone With the Wind*, we instead get the same, sad (and simplistic) characterization of bad Southerners opposing good Northerners.

If you see the film, it's easy to see who the 'heroes' are: everyone surrounding Lincoln. Beginning with the abolitionist congressmen (and they were all white men at the time, since women not only couldn't run, they couldn't even vote back then) to the members of Lincoln's cabinet - all were the heroes in the film.

The 'Southern' contingent was portrayed, at Spielberg's interpretation, only as hate mongers and racists (the character of Alexander Stephens, the vice president of the Confederacy, who was a Congressman from Georgia and later its governor, was portrayed by Jackie Earle Haley (a.k.a. Freddie Kruger) in

what most will remember as an extraordinarily evil man representing what Spielberg stereotypically portrays as an extraordinarily evil South.

Blacks in this film are poignantly (and understandably) portrayed by Spielberg as both social victims and military heroes. No one doubts the accuracy of that interpretation.

Thematically, slavery is the low-hanging fruit of the Civil War (most scholars acknowledge this and movies love to exploit it). A defense lawyer might call this leading the witness, but it's really more about leading the audience, in this case down the politically correct road.

It's not as if this is anything new. According to an article which appeared on CNN.com, Southern stereotypes "are very longstanding," says David Davis, a literature and Southern studies professor at Mercer University in Macon, Georgia. Davis says it's always predictable - particularly in film as well as in many aspects of American life. "African-American caricature has become less acceptable and white Southern caricature has taken its place," Davis said.

No one is denying Spielberg's editorial and, frankly, political license to focus on this aspect of Lincoln's life. In fact, the passing of the 13th Amendment was a crowning achievement for a man who was arguably our greatest

president.

But there was no effort made to show the complexities of both sides of this war or even of the debate around the 13th amendment. While I would stop short of calling the film 'revisionist history' - what a disappointment it was that the greatest film director of our age took the easy (and politically correct) way out; that is, good vs. evil, black vs. white, Republicans vs. Democrats, liberal vs. conservative, victims vs. victimizers. Sound familiar?

While you certainly don't expect slave owners to be portrayed as heroes, you would hope that a man of Spielberg's stature and accomplishment would not give in to political correctness and take the predictable path of reinforcing the stereotyping of the American South. In doing so, he has not only misses an opportunity to enlighten his audience with the tragedy and complexity of the Civil War, but he further risks playing on the unmistakable (but rarely discussed) fear of a nation already coping with racial tension and political division.

I would have expected more from the man who gave us *Saving Private Ryan* and *Schindler's List*. While Spielberg may yet win his third Academy Award for *Lincoln*, the Oscar will have lost some of its shiny luster; not so much for what the film was but for what it could have been.

David R. Altman is a contributing writer to the *Pickens County Progress*.



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