Movie Night is a rare event on Capitol Hill, so when Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nevada) and Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Kentucky) took a break from fiscal cliff brinksmanship to host a Dec. 19 screening of *Lincoln*, an account of the process that led to the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution, which outlawed slavery in the United States, it was a given that they would serve politics with the popcorn. Their invitation praised the film for depicting “the good [that] is attainable when public servants put the betterment of the country ahead of short-term political interests.”

Alas, the senators, producer Steven Spielberg, and screenwriter Tony Kushner didn't get their history quite right. The actual events suggest a more complicated relationship between political pragmatism and ideological purity.

In the film *Lincoln* (played brilliantly by Daniel Day Lewis) races against the clock to pass the amendment before the Confederacy, staggering from the blows dealt by Union troops under Ulysses Grant, sued for peace and made the continuance of slavery a condition of surrender. Lincoln pounds tables, lines up support from conservative Republicans, cajoles Radical Republicans to tone down their rhetoric, and sends forth arm-twisters, horse-traders, and bribers to wring enough Democratic votes to create the two-thirds majority needed to pass the amendment in the House of Representatives. He is a one-man juggernaut, raw nerves wrapped round a core of steel, a singular man fighting a lonely battle against Republican pessimism, Democratic intransigence and nightly haranguing from his wife. “Blood's been spelt to afford this moment now,” he rages. “Now. Now.”

What's wrong with this picture? To begin with, it fails to note that the Thirteenth Amendment was conceived and pushed by African Americans, including Frederick Douglas, and by Radical Republicans. According to biographer David Donald, Lincoln was a latecomer to the movement. In 1864, to be sure, Lincoln urged the nominating convention of his party to make the Thirteenth Amendment a "central plank" in their platform. But he did not spend his political capital that year when the amendment passed the Senate and failed in the House, and he didn't make it a priority during his re-election campaign.

The film acknowledges in passing (so as not to spoil the drama) that Radical Republicans made significant gains in that election, and that the amendment was sure to be passed when the new Congress convened in the spring of 1865. The film doesn't add that the "Aye" column was likely to grow even more because politicians from Confederate states were told that supporting the Thirteenth Amendment was a condition for "re-admission" to the Union. (Nor does *Lincoln* acknowledge that although he had the votes, Lincoln was still inclined to temporize: During his negotiations with the Confederate commissioners in February 1865, the president advised them to ratify the Thirteenth Amendment prospectively so as to be able to make it take effect in five years as opposed to immediately. "Such a ratification would be valid in my opinion," he said. So much for "Now, now, now.")

So while the film portrays a president using the full force of his office and not a little skullduggery to drag his country toward justice, historians see a man pushed and pulled part of the way, a man too inclined, perhaps, to compromise. In his new book, *Freedom National: The Destruction of Slavery in the United States, 1861-1865*, the historian James Oakes, an unabashed admirer of Lincoln, indicates that with the Thirteenth Amendment, "Congress moved a step beyond Lincoln's own policies up to that point."

*Lincoln* has been hailed as a lesson in the fruits of compromise. It has prompted unflattering comparisons with today's Congress, where Tea Party Republicans denounce compromise as a sell-out. Actually, in 1864 and 1865, abolitionist "purists" pulled a cautious Lincoln toward their point of view. Only then did Lincoln become Lincoln, trawling for votes, jawboning, and refusing to compromise.

The lesson of the Thirteenth Amendment, it seems to me, should be that when well-grounded principle and pragmatism exist in a dynamic tension, good public policies can emerge. The lame-duck Congress of 1864 was able to transcend partisan politics, albeit just barely, and in doing so, made the kind of history that evokes pride in the United States. Despite the eleventh hour passage of a fiscal cliff tax bill, a piece of legislation not worthy of comparison with the Thirteenth Amendment, or the Emancipation Proclamation, whose 150th anniversary we celebrate this week, the lame-duck Congress of 2012 can't make that claim.