

# Abraham Lincoln: The Great Emancipator?

**I**n his lecture, Professor Foner explored the attitudes toward slavery that Lincoln held for virtually his entire life, and traced how he changed under the pressure of world-shattering events. He argued that Lincoln became the Great Emancipator, that is to say, he assumed the role thrust on him by history, and tried to live up to it. In the extract below Professor Foner illustrates the evolution of Lincoln's views on slavery in the light of the Civil War.

Many historians have ignored or downplayed Lincoln's belief in colonization. They all quote the Peoria speech, in which Lincoln explained his opposition to the expansion of slavery: 'I hate it because of the monstrous injustice of slavery itself. I hate it because it deprives our republican example of its just influence in the world – enables the enemies of free institutions, with plausibility, to taunt us as hypocrites – causes the real friends of freedom to doubt our sincerity.' Few add that in the same speech, Lincoln remarked that if given all the power in the world he would not know what to do about slavery. His first impulse, he continued, would be to free the slaves and send them back to Africa, their 'native land.' Easily forgotten is the fact that Africa was no more the native land of African-Americans in 1854 than England was Lincoln's native land even though his ancestors had emigrated from there. The slave trade to the mainland colonies had peaked between 1730 and 1770. Most blacks in the 1850s were American-born, a century removed from Africa. Africa was important to their culture, their sense of identity. But few blacks embraced the idea of separating the races promoted by Lincoln and the rest of the white political establishment. Most thought of themselves as Americans.

It is essential to understand both elements of Lincoln – the racism and the genuine hatred of slavery. For Lincoln was typical of the majority of northerners, who were willing to go to war over the issue of slavery's expansion, yet held racist beliefs. Lincoln's racial views were by no means extreme for his era. The Democratic party was far more virulent in accusing Republicans of belief in 'Negro equality', and in insisting that the

natural rights enumerated in the Declaration of Independence applied to white persons alone. Lincoln at least insisted on equality insofar as it related to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Blacks, he believed, were entitled to enjoy these rights, although not, ultimately, in the United States.

---

**The Sarah Tryphena Phillips Lecture was delivered at the Academy on 3 November 2003 by Professor Eric Foner FBA, DeWitt Clinton Professor at Columbia University.**

---

During the Civil War, of course, Lincoln had to do more than talk about slavery. He had to act. How did he become the Great Emancipator?

Between 1834, when the British abolished slavery in their empire, and 1888, when emancipation came to Brazil, some six million slaves were freed in the Western Hemisphere. Of these, four million, two-thirds of the total, lived in the United States. Emancipation in the United States dwarfed any other in the history of the hemisphere in numbers, scale, and the economic power of the institution of slavery. Emancipation meant many things, one of them the liquidation of the largest concentration of property in American society.

The Civil War, of course, did not begin as a crusade to abolish slavery. Almost from the beginning, however, abolitionists and Radical Republicans pressed for action against slavery as a war measure. Lincoln slowly began to put forward his own ideas. In summary, Lincoln first proposed gradual, voluntary emancipation coupled with colonization – the traditional approach of mainstream politicians. He suggested this plan to the border states – the four slave states (Delaware, Maryland, Kentucky, and Missouri) that remained in the Union. He found no takers. In 1862, Lincoln held a famous meeting with black leaders. This was probably the first time in American history that black persons entered the White House in a capacity other than slaves or

servants. But Lincoln's message was that they should urge their people to emigrate. They refused.

It was Congress in 1862 that moved ahead of Lincoln on emancipation, although he signed all their measures: the abolition of slavery in the territories; abolition in the District of Columbia (with around \$300 compensation for each slaveowner); the Second Confiscation Act of July 1862, which freed all slaves of pro-Confederate owners in areas henceforth occupied by the Union army and slaves of such owners who escaped to Union lines. The Confiscation Act also spoke of colonizing the freed slaves outside the country. Meanwhile, Lincoln was moving toward his own plan of emancipation. A powerful combination of 'events' propelled him:

1 – The failure of efforts to fight the Civil War as a conventional war without targeting the bedrock of southern society. Had General George C. McClellan succeeded in the spring of 1862 in capturing Richmond or defeating Lee's army, the Civil War might have ended without emancipation. But the North lost battle after battle. Military failure generated support in the North for calls to make slavery a target.

2 – By 1862, the Union's hold on the border states was secure. It was far less imperative than in 1861 to tailor administration policies to retain their loyalty.

3 – Many northerners feared that Britain and France might recognize the Confederacy or even intervene on its behalf. Adding emancipation to preserving the Union as a war aim would deter them. These countries did not want to seem to be fighting for slavery.

4 – Slavery itself was beginning to disintegrate. Slaves had forged a quasi-independent culture in which the Biblical story of Exodus became central to their understanding of Christianity and their own history as a people. They saw themselves as akin to the children of Israel in ancient Egypt, whom God would one day deliver from

bondage. From the beginning, the slaves saw the Civil War as heralding the long-awaited dawn of freedom. Based on this perception, they took actions that propelled a reluctant white America down the road to emancipation. Hundreds, then thousands ran away to Union lines. Far from the battlefields, reports multiplied of insubordinate behaviour, of slaves refusing to obey orders. Slaves realized that the war had changed the balance of power in the South. In 1862, Union forces entered the heart of a major plantation area, the sugar region of southern Louisiana. Slaves drove off the overseers and claimed their freedom. These actions forced the administration to begin to devise policies with regard to slavery.

5 – Enthusiasm for enlistment was waning rapidly in the North. By 1863, a draft would be authorized. At the beginning of war, the army had refused to accept black volunteers. But as the war dragged on, the reservoir of black manpower could no longer be ignored.

All these pressures moved Lincoln in the direction of emancipation. In September 1862, he issued the Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation – essentially a warning to the South to lay down its arms or face a final proclamation in ninety days. On January 1, 1863, came the Proclamation itself.

The Emancipation Proclamation is perhaps the most misunderstood important document in American history. Certainly, it is untrue that Lincoln freed four million slaves with a stroke of his pen. Many slaves were not covered. The Proclamation had no bearing on the slaves in the four border states. Since they remained in the Union, Lincoln had no constitutional authority to act regarding slavery in these states. The Proclamation exempted certain areas of the Confederacy that had fallen under Union military control, including the entire state of Tennessee and parts of Virginia and Louisiana. Perhaps 750,000 of the four million slaves were not covered by the Proclamation. It only applied to areas under Confederate control. Thus, there was some truth in the famous comment by *The Times* of London that the Proclamation resembled a papal bull against a comet – both were acts outside the jurisdiction of their authors.



*Abraham Lincoln entering Richmond, Virginia, drawing by Thomas Nast published 1866. Image courtesy of Son of the South (<http://www.sonofthesouth.net>).*

A military measure, whose constitutional legitimacy rested on the 'war power' of the president, the Emancipation Proclamation often proves disappointing to those who read it. Unlike the Declaration of Independence, it contains no soaring language, no immortal preamble enunciating the rights of man. 'It had all the moral grandeur of a bill of lading,' wrote Richard Hofstadter. Nonetheless, the Proclamation was the turning point of the Civil War, and in

Lincoln's understanding of his own role in history. Lincoln was not the Great Emancipator if by that we mean someone who was waiting all his life to get to the point where he could abolish slavery. He was not the Great Emancipator if this means that he freed four million slaves in an instant. But what I want to argue is that Lincoln *became* the Great Emancipator – that is to say, he assumed the role thrust on him by history, and tried to live up to it.

The Emancipation Proclamation was markedly different from Lincoln's previous statements and policies regarding slavery. It contained no mention of compensation for slaveowners. There was no mention of colonization, although this had been included in both the Second Confiscation Act and the Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation. For the first time, it authorized the enrolment of black soldiers into the Union military (the Second Confiscation Act had envisioned using blacks as military labourers, not 'armed service' as the Emancipation Proclamation states). The Proclamation set in motion the process by which 200,000 black men in the last two years of the war served in the Union army and navy, playing a critical role in achieving Union victory. I believe that the need to enrol black troops explains Lincoln's abandonment of colonization. He understood that fighting in the army staked a claim to citizenship. You could not ask men to fight for the Union and then deport them and their families from the country.

Even more profoundly, the Emancipation Proclamation changed the character of the Civil War. It marked the moment when it moved from a conventional war of army against army to a war in which the transformation of southern society became an objective of the Union. Karl Marx, then in London writing interesting comments on Civil War for the *New York Tribune*, put it this way: 'Up to now we have witnessed only the first act of the Civil War – the constitutional waging of war. The second act, the revolutionary waging of war, is at hand.' In his first annual message to Congress, in December 1861, Lincoln had said he did not want to war to degenerate into 'a violent and remorseless revolutionary struggle'. The Emancipation Proclamation announced that this was precisely what the war must become. The Civil War would now continue to total victory, and unconditional surrender.

As I have noted, Lincoln took on the role of Great Emancipator. In 1864, with Union casualties mounting, there was talk of a compromise peace. Some urged Lincoln to rescind the Proclamation, in which case, they believed, the South could be persuaded to return to the Union. Lincoln would not consider this. Were he to do so, he told one visitor, 'I should be damned in time and eternity.' Lincoln, the moderate Illinois lawyer had become the agent of what Charles and Mary Beard called the Second American Revolution. And the Proclamation may not have ended slavery when it was issued, but it sounded the death knell of slavery in the United States. Everybody recognized that if slavery perished in South Carolina, Alabama, and Mississippi, it could hardly survive in Tennessee, Kentucky, and a few parishes of Louisiana.

Moreover, by decoupling emancipation and colonization, Lincoln in effect launched the historical process known as Reconstruction – the remaking of southern society, politics, and race relations. I have written a 600 page book on this subject, which I will not attempt to summarize here. I will note, however, that unlike most accounts, my book begins not in April 1865 with General Robert E. Lee's surrender and the death of the Confederacy, but on January 1, 1863, with the Emancipation Proclamation. This is not to say that Lincoln, before his death, had worked out a coherent plan of Reconstruction. Winning the war was always his main priority and his efforts to create new governments in the south – in Louisiana, for example – on the basis of great leniency to former Confederates, were efforts to speed Union victory and secure complete emancipation, not to offer a blueprint for the postwar South.

Lincoln knew all too well that the Proclamation depended for its effectiveness on Union victory, that it did not apply to

all slaves, and that its constitutionality was certain to be challenged in the future. In the last two years of the war he worked to secure complete abolition, pressing the border states to take action against slavery on their own (which Maryland and Missouri did), demanding that southerners who wished to have their other property restored pledge to support abolition, and working to secure congressional passage of the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution, which passed by a narrow margin in early 1865. When ratified, the amendment marked the irrevocable destruction of slavery throughout the nation.

I have called Reconstruction 'America's unfinished revolution'. It was an attempt, which ultimately failed, to create a genuine interracial democracy in the South from the ruins of slavery. Lincoln did not live to see Reconstruction implemented and eventually abandoned. But in the last two years of the war, he came to recognize that if emancipation settled one question, the fate of slavery, it opened another – what was to be the role of emancipated slaves in postwar American life? The Proclamation portended a far-reaching transformation of Southern society and a redefinition of the place of blacks in American life. Lincoln understood this. The Gettysburg address spoke of the war as ushering in a 'new birth of freedom' for the United States, a freedom in which blacks for the first time would share. This meant a redefinition of American nationality itself.

---

Professor Foner is the author of *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution* (New York, 1988)

The full text of this Lecture has been published in *Proceedings of the British Academy*, Volume 125, 2003 Lectures, and can be found via [www.proc.britac.ac.uk](http://www.proc.britac.ac.uk).

---