

WHO FREED THE SLAVES? EMANCIPATION AND ITS MEANING IN AMERICAN LIFE

Ira Berlin
(Maryland)

On January 1, 1863, Abraham Lincoln promulgated his Emancipation Proclamation. A document whose grand title promised so much but whose bland words delivered so little, the Emancipation Proclamation was an enigma from the first. Contemporaries were unsure whether to condemn it as a failure of idealism or applaud it as a triumph of realpolitik, and the American people have remained similarly divided ever since. Few officially sponsored commemorations currently mark the day slaves once called "The Great Jubilee," and, of late, black Americans have taken to celebrating their liberation on Juneteenth, a previously little-known marker of the arrival of the Union army in Texas and the liquidation of slavery in the most distant corner of the Confederacy. Unlike our other icons – the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, for example – the Emancipation Proclamation is not on regular display at the National Archives.

However, its exhibition earlier in January 1993 on the occasion of the 130th anniversary of its issuance, was and is a moment of some note. In 1993, the exhibit sent thousands of Americans into the streets, where they waited in long lines on frigid January days to see Lincoln's handiwork. At the end of the five-day exhibit, some 30,000 had filed had passed the Proclamation. As visitors left the Archives' great rotunda, the minions of Dan Rather, Bryant Gumble, and Tom Brokaw waited with microphones in hand. Before national television audiences, visitors declared themselves deeply moved by the great document. One told a reporter from the *Washington Post* that it had changed his life forever.¹

Such interest in a document whose faded words cannot be easily seen, let alone deciphered, and whose intricate logic cannot be easily unravelled, let alone comprehended, raises important questions about the role of history in the way Americans think about their racial past and present. It appears that the very inaccessibility of the Emancipation Proclamation makes Lincoln's pronouncement a focal point for conflicting notions about America's racial destiny. For many people, both black and white, the Proclamation bespeaks the distance the American people have travelled from the nightmarish reality of slavery – what one visitor called "a distant humiliation too painful to speak of." For others, it suggests the distance that had yet to be traversed – "we have to build on the changes that started with our ancestors 130 years ago."

But, however they viewed the Proclamation, the visitors used Lincoln's edict as

1. *New York Times*, 20 December 1992; *Washington Post*, 30 December 1992, 1 January 1993; *Baltimore Sun*, 31 December 1992.

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the occasion to call for rapprochement between black and white in a racially divided city, in a racially divided nation. Dismissing the notion that Lincoln embodied – rather than transcended – American racism (“The greatest honky of them all,” Julius Lester once declared), the men and women who paraded before the Proclamation saw the document as a balm. It was as if Lincoln – or his words – could reach out across the ages and heal the wound. Mrs. Loretta Carter Hanes, a suburban Washington school teacher whose insistent requests to see the Proclamation had initiated the exhibit, told reporters of her hopes that the display would inaugurate another new birth of freedom.²

The public presentation of the Proclamation has also brought historians out in force. Meeting in Washington in December 1992, the American Historical Association – with more than usual forethought – convened a panel entitled “Black, White, and Lincoln.” Professor James M. McPherson of Princeton University delivered the lead paper entitled, “Who Freed the Slaves?”³

For historians, the issues involved in McPherson’s question – and by implication Lincoln’s proclamation – took on even greater weight because they represented a larger debate between those who looked to the top of the social order for cues in understanding the past and those who looked to the bottom. It was an old controversy that had previously appeared in the guise of a contest between social history and political history. Although the categories themselves had lost much of their luster in the post-structuralist age, the politically-charged debate over the very essence of the historical process had lost none of its bite – at least for scholars.

The question of who freed the slaves thus not only encompassed the specific issue of responsibility for emancipation in the American South, but also resonated loudly in contemporary controversies about the role of “Great White Men” in our history books and the canon of “Great Literature” in our curriculum. McPherson’s paper and the discussion that followed reverberated with sharp condemnations and stout defenses of “great white males.” Lines between scholars who gave “workers, immigrants, [and] women,” their due and those who refused to acknowledge the “so-called ‘non-elite’” were drawn taut. “Elitist history” was celebrated and denounced.

The debate among historians, although often parochial and self-absorbed, was not without its redeeming features. For like the concerns articulated by the visitors to the National Archives, it too addressed conflicting notions about the role of high authority, on the one hand, and the actions of ordinary men and women, on the other, in shaping American society. Both the citizens who queued up outside the Archives and the scholars who debated the issue within the confines of the American Historical Association’s meeting found deep resonance in the exhibition of the Emancipation Proclamation. It gave both reason to consider the struggle for a politics (and a history) that is both appreciative of ordinary people and respectful of rightful authority in a democratic society.

2. *Washington Post*, 19 December 1992; *USA Today*, 30 December 1992; *Norfolk Virginian Pilot and Ledger Star*, 1 January 1993. For a view more in line with Julius Lester’s, see the column by Michael Paul Williams in the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, 4 January 1993.

3. The other members of the panel were William Safire of the *New York Times*, Gabor S. Boritt of Gettysburg College, David Herbert Donald of Harvard University, and my colleague at the University of Maryland, Leslie S. Rowland.

The debate over origins of emancipation in the American South can be parsed in such a way as to divide historians into two camps, those who understand emancipation as the slaves' struggle to free themselves and those who see The Great Emancipator's hand at work. McPherson made precisely such a division. While acknowledging the role of the slaves in their own liberation, McPherson came down heavily on the side of Lincoln as the author of emancipation. He characterized the critics of Lincoln's preeminence – advocates of what he repeatedly called the "self-emancipation thesis" – as scholarly populists whose stock in trade was a celebration of the "so-called 'non-elite.'" Such scholars, McPherson implied, denied the historical role of "white males" – perhaps all regularly constituted authority – in a misguided celebration of the masses. Among those so denominated by McPherson were Robert Engs, Vincent Harding, and myself and my colleagues on the Freedmen and Southern Society Project at the University of Maryland. While other scholars were implicated, the Freedmen and Southern Society Project – "the largest scholarly enterprise on the history of emancipation" – was held responsible for elevating the "self-emancipation thesis" into what McPherson called a new orthodoxy. If such be the case, I – and I am sure the other members of the Project – am honored by the unanimity with which the Project's work and our recent book *Free At Last* has been accepted by a profession that rarely agrees on anything. However, McPherson's representation of the Project's position does no justice to the arguments made in *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation*. Indeed, it is more in the nature of a caricature than a characterization.⁴

Lincoln's proclamation, as its critics have noted, freed not a single slave who was not already entitled to freedom under legislation passed by Congress the previous year. It applied only to the slaves in territories then beyond the reach of federal authority. It specifically exempted Tennessee and Union-occupied portions of Louisiana and Virginia, and it left slavery in the loyal border states – Delaware, Maryland, Kentucky, and Missouri – untouched. Indeed, as an engine of emancipation, the Proclamation went no further than the Second Confiscation Act of July 1862, which freed all slaves who entered Union lines professing that their owners were disloyal, as well as those slaves who fell under federal control as Union troops occupied Confederate territory. Moreover, at its fullest, the Emancipation Proclamation rested upon the President's power as commander-in-chief and was subject to constitutional challenge. Even Lincoln recognized the limitations of his ill-defined wartime authority, and, as his commitment to emancipation grew firmer in 1863 and 1864, he pressed for passage of a constitutional amendment to affirm slavery's destruction.

4. Since most historical scholarship is carried on in the solitary artisan tradition, it is easy to exaggerate the numbers involved in collaborative historical research. Sad to say, "the largest scholarly enterprise on the history of emancipation" bears little resemblance to the Manhattan Project or any major research project in the social sciences. Since its inception in 1976, fewer than a dozen historians have been associated with the Project – never more than three at any one time. Besides myself, the editors of the four volumes in print are Barbara Jeane Field, Thavolia Glymph, Steven Miller, Joseph P. Reidy, Leslie S. Rowland, and Julie Saville.

The Project's main work has been published by Cambridge University Press under the head of *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation*. Thus far four volumes are in print: *The Destruction of Slavery* (1985); *The Wartime Genesis of Free Labor: The Upper South* (1993); *The Wartime Genesis of Free Labor: The Lower South* (1991); *The Black Military Experience* (1982). In 1992, The New Press has published an abridgment of the first four volumes entitled *Free At Last: A Documentary History of Slavery, Freedom, and the Civil War* and Cambridge has issued a volume of essays entitled *Slaves No More*.

What then was the point of the Proclamation? It spoke in muffled tones that heralded not the dawn of universal liberty but the compromised and piecemeal arrival of an undefined freedom. Indeed, the Proclamation's flat prose, ridiculed by the late Richard Hofstadter as having the moral grandeur of a bill of lading, suggests that the true authorship of African-American freedom lies elsewhere – not at the top of American society but at the bottom. McPherson is correct in noting that the editors of the Freedmen and Southern Society Project seized this insight and expanded it in *Freedom*.

From the first guns at Fort Sumter, the strongest advocates of emancipation were the slaves themselves. Lacking political standing or public voice, forbidden access to the weapons of war, slaves nevertheless tossed aside the grand pronouncements of Lincoln and other Union leaders that the sectional conflict was only a war for national unity. Instead, they moved directly to put their own freedom – and that of their posterity – atop the national agenda. Steadily, as opportunities arose, slaves risked all for freedom. By abandoning their owners, coming uninvited into Union lines, and offering their assistance as laborers, pioneers, guides, and spies, slaves forced federal soldiers at the lowest level to recognize their importance to the Union's success. That understanding travelled quickly up the chain of command. In time, it became evident even to the most obtuse federal commanders that every slave who crossed into Union lines was a double gain: one subtracted from the Confederacy and one added to the Union. The slaves' resolute determination to secure their liberty converted many white Americans to the view that the security of the Union depended upon the destruction of slavery. Eventually, this belief tipped the balance in favor of freedom, even among those who had little interest in the question of slavery and no love for black people.

Once the connection between the war and freedom had been made, slaves understood that a Union victory was imperative, and they did what they could to secure it. They threw their full weight behind the federal cause, and "tabooed" those few in their ranks who shunned the effort.⁵ More than 135,000 slave men became Union soldiers. Even deep in the Confederacy, where escape to federal lines was impossible, slaves did what they could to undermine the Confederacy and strengthen the Union – from aiding escaped Northern prisoners of war to praying for Northern military success. With their loyalty, their labor and their lives, slaves provided crucial information, muscle, and blood in support of the federal war effort. No one was more responsible for smashing the shackles of slavery than the slaves themselves.⁶

But, as the slaves realized, they could not free themselves. Nowhere in the four volumes of *Freedom* or in *Free At Last* do I or the other editors of the Freedmen and Southern Society Project claim they did. Nowhere do we use the term of "self-emancipation." Slaves could – and they did – put the issue of freedom on the wartime agenda; they could – and they did – make certain that the question of their liberation did not disappear in complex welter of the war; they could – and they did – insure that there was no retreat from the commitment to emancipation once the issue was drawn. In short, they did what was in their power to do with the weapons they had. They could not vote, pass laws, issue field orders, or promulgate

5. See, for example, *The Wartime Genesis of Free Labor: The Upper South*, doc. 7.

6. The argument is laid out in full in *The Destruction of Slavery*.

great proclamations. That was the realm of citizens, legislators, military officers, and the president. However, the actions of the slaves made it possible for citizens, legislators, military officers, and the president to act. Thus, in many ways, slaves set others in motion. Slaves were the prime movers in the emancipation drama, not the sole movers. It does no disservice to Lincoln – or to anyone one else – to say that his claim to greatness rests upon his willingness to act when the moment was right.

Lincoln, as McPherson emphasizes, was no friend of slavery. He believed, as he said many times, that “if slavery is not wrong, nothing is wrong.” But, as president, Lincoln also believed he had a constitutional obligation not to interfere with slavery where it existed. Shortly before his inauguration, he offered to support a proposed constitutional amendment that would have prohibited any subsequent amendment authorizing Congress “to abolish or interfere . . . with the domestic institutions” of any state, “including slavery”.⁷ As wartime leader, he feared the disaffection of the loyal slave states, which he understood to be critical to the success of the Union. Lincoln also doubted whether white and black could live as equals in American society and thought it best for black people to remove themselves physically from the United States. Like many white Americans from Thomas Jefferson to Henry Clay, Lincoln favored the colonization of former slaves in Africa or elsewhere. At his insistence, the congressional legislation providing for the emancipation of slaves in the District of Columbia in April 1862 included an appropriation to aid the removal of liberated slaves who wished to leave the United States. Through the end of 1862, Lincoln continually connected emancipation in the border states to the colonization of slaves somewhere beyond the borders of the United States.⁸

Where others led on emancipation, Lincoln followed. Lincoln responded slowly to demands for emancipation as they worked their way up the military chain of command and as they echoed in Northern public opinion. He revoked the field emancipations of Union generals John C. Fremont in August 1861 and David Hunter in May 1862, who invoked martial law to liberate slaves in Missouri and South Carolina, respectively. Through the first year and a half of the war, Lincoln – preoccupied with the loyalty of the slaveholding states within the Union and hopeful for the support of Whiggish slaveholders within the Confederacy – remained respectful of the rights of the master.

As pressure for emancipation grew in the spring of 1862, Lincoln continued to urge gradual, compensated emancipation. The compensation would be to slaveholders for property lost, not to slaves for labor stolen. In late September 1862, even while announcing that he would proclaim emancipation on January 1 if the rebellious states did not return to the Union, he continued to call for gradual, compensated emancipation in the border states and compensation for loyal slaveholders elsewhere. The preliminary emancipation proclamation also reiterated his support for colonizing freed slaves “upon this continent or elsewhere”.⁹ As black laborers became essential to the Union war effort and as demands to enlist black men in the federal army mounted, the pressure for emancipation became inexorable.

7. For the proposed amendment, see Edward McPherson, *The Political History of the United States of America during the Great Rebellion*, 2nd ed., Washington, 1865, 59; Abraham Lincoln, *Collected Works*, ed. Roy P. Basler, 9 vols., New Brunswick, N.J., 1953-55, vol. 4, pp. 421-41.

8. Lincoln, *Collected Works*, vol. 5, pp. 29-31, 317-19.

9. *U.S., Statutes at Large*, vol. 12, pp. 1267-68.

On January 1, 1863, Lincoln fulfilled his promise to free all slaves in the states still in rebellion. Had another Republican been in Lincoln's place, that person doubtless would have done the same. Without question, some would have acted more expeditiously and with greater bravado. Without question, some would have acted more cautiously with lesser resolve. In the end, Lincoln did what needed to be done. Thus, when Lincoln finally acted, he moved with confidence and determination. He stripped the final Emancipation Proclamation of any reference to compensation for former slaveholders or colonization for former slaves. He added provisions that allowed for the service of black men in the Union army and navy. The Proclamation opened the door to the eventual enlistment of nearly 190,000 black men – most of them former slaves. Military enlistment became the surest solvent of slavery, extending to places the Emancipation Proclamation did not reach, especially the loyal slave states. Once slave men entered the Union army, they were free and they made it clear they expected their families to be free too. In March, 1865, Congress confirmed this understanding and provided for the freedom of the immediate families of all black soldiers. Lincoln's actions, however tardy, gave force to all that the slaves had risked. The Emancipation Proclamation transformed the war in ways only the President could. After January 1, 1863, the Union army was an army of liberation and Lincoln was its commander.

Lincoln understood the importance of his role, both politically and morally—just as the slaves had understood theirs. Having determined to free the slaves, Lincoln declared he would not take back the Emancipation Proclamation even when military failure and political reverses threatened that policy. He praised the role of black soldiers in preserving the Union and liquidating chattel bondage. The growing presence of black men in Union ranks deepened Lincoln's commitment to emancipation. Lincoln later suggested that black soldiers might have the vote, perhaps his greatest concession to racial equality.¹⁰ To secure the freedom that his Proclamation had promised, Lincoln promoted passage of the Thirteenth Amendment, although he did not live to see its ratification.

The Emancipation Proclamation's place in the drama of emancipation is thus secure—as is Lincoln's. To deny it is to ignore the intense struggle by which freedom arrived. It is to ignore the Union soldiers who sheltered slaves, the abolitionists who stumped for emancipation, and the thousands of men and women who like Lincoln changed their minds as slaves made the case for universal liberty. Reducing the Emancipation Proclamation to a nullity and Lincoln to a cipher denies human agency as fully as writing the slaves out of the struggle for freedom.

Both Lincoln and the slaves played their appointed parts in the drama of emancipation. From an historian's perspective, denying their complementary roles limits understanding of the complex interaction of human agency and events which resulted in slavery's demise. The Freedmen and Southern Society Project has sought to restore the fullness of the history of emancipation by expanding the terrain upon which it should be understood, emphasizing – and documenting – the process by

10. "I barely suggest for your private consideration", Lincoln wrote to the Unionist governor of Louisiana in March 1864, "whether some of the colored people may not be let in [to the suffrage] — as, for instance, the very intelligent, and especially those who have fought gallantly in our ranks. They would probably help", he added, "in some trying times to come, to keep the jewel of liberty within the family of freedom". Lincoln, *Collected Works*, vol. 7, p. 243.

which freedom arrived. While the editors argue that the slaves were in fact the prime movers of emancipation, nowhere do they deny Lincoln's centrality to the events that culminated in universal freedom. In fact, rather than single out slaves or exclude Lincoln (as the term "self-emancipation" implies), the editors argue for the significance of others as well: white Union soldiers – few of them racial egalitarians – who saw firsthand how slavery weakened the Union cause; their families and friends in the North – eager for federal victory – who learned from these soldiers the strength the Confederate regime drew from bonded labor; the Northern men and women – most of them with no connection to the abolition movement – who acted upon such news to petition Congress; and the congressmen and senators who eventually moved in favor of freedom. This roster, of course, does not include all those involved in the social and political process that ended slavery in the American South. It omits the slaveholders, no bit players in the drama. Taken as a whole, however, the Project's work does suggest something of the complexity of emancipation and the limitation of seeing slavery's end as the product of any one individual – or element – in the social order.

Emphasizing that emancipation was not the work of one hand underscores the force of contingency – the crooked course by which universal freedom arrived. It captures the ebb and flow of events which, at times, placed Lincoln among the opponents of emancipation and then propelled him to the forefront of freedom's friends. It emphasizes the clash of wills that is the essence of politics – whether it involves enfranchised legislators or voteless slaves. Politics, perforce, necessitate an on-the-ground struggle among different interests, not the unfolding of a single idea or perspective – whether that of an individual or an age. Lincoln, no less than the meanest slave, acted upon changing possibilities as he understood them. The very same events – secession and war – that gave the slaves' actions new meaning also gave Lincoln's actions new meaning. To think that Lincoln could have anticipated these changes – or, more strangely still, somehow embodied them – imbues him with power over the course of events that no human being has ever enjoyed. Lincoln was part of history, not above it. Whatever he believed about slavery, in 1861 Lincoln did not see the war as an instrument of emancipation. The slaves did. Lincoln's commitment to emancipation changed with time because it had to. The slaves' commitment to universal freedom did not waver because it could not.

Complexity – contrary to McPherson – is not ambivalence or ambiguity. To tell the whole story – to follow that crooked course – does not diminish the clarity of an argument or mystify it into a maze of "nuances, paradox, or irony." Telling the entire tale is not a form of obscuration. If done right, it clarifies precisely because it consolidates the mass of competing claims under a single head. Elegance or simplicity of argument is useful only when it encompasses all of the evidence, not when it excludes or narrows it.

In a season when constituted authority once again tries to find the voice of the people and when the people are testing the measure of their leaders, it is well to recall the relationship of both to securing freedom's greatest victory. In this sense, slaves were right in celebrating January 1, 1863, as the Day of Jubilee. As Loretta Hanes noted 130 years later, "It meant so much to people because it was a ray of light, the hope of a new day coming. And it gave them courage".¹¹ Indeed, the Emancipation Proclamation reminds us all – both those viewing its faded pages and those who studied it – that

11. *USA Today*, 30 December 1992.

real change both derives from the actions of the people and that it requires the imprimatur of constituted authority. It teaches that “social” history is no less political than “political” history – for it too rests upon the bending of wills, which is the essence of politics – and that no political process is determined by a single individual. If the Emancipation Proclamation speaks to the central role of constituted authority – in this case Abraham Lincoln – in making history, it speaks no less loudly to the role of ordinary men and women, seizing the moment to make the world according to their own understanding of justice and human decency. The connection between the two should not be forgotten as we try to rebuild American politics – and try to write a history worthy of that politics.