

Celebrating Lincoln's crafty moves to emancipation



ONE-HUNDRED and fifty years ago, President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation freeing all slaves in any state or territory that was controlled by the Confederacy. The act made Lincoln one of the most revered presidents, forging his reputation as the "Great Emancipator," a status worthy of a major motion picture in these modern times.

Lincoln's issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation was only one in a series of steps to achieve emancipation and, in actual practice, did not free a single slave at all.

When Lincoln took office on March 4, 1861, he made clear his intention "not to interfere with slavery where it already existed." Although he was morally opposed to human bondage, he recognized his constitutional responsibility to enforce the Fifth Amendment, which protected the property of all citizens, and included human chattel.

As his presidency unfolded, however, Lincoln explored various ways to abolish slavery while still upholding the federal constitution. In the winter of 1862, for example, he encouraged the border states of Missouri, Kentucky, Maryland and Delaware, which remained loyal to the Union, to adopt a policy of voluntary emancipation.

Promising financial compensation to slaveholders, Lincoln proposed that emancipation be followed by the colonization of freed slaves either in Central America or Africa. If adopted, he believed the plan would discourage the South from continuing the Civil War. But the border states refused to comply.

COMMENTARY

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Once war began and as Union casualties grew to appalling proportions, Lincoln questioned why God allowed the carnage to continue and wondered whether he was an "instrument" to accomplish some "higher purpose."

Interpreting the Union victory at Antietam as a sign from God to end slavery, Lincoln, on Sept. 22, 1862, announced his intention to free all the slaves living in Confederate territory if the rebellious states did not free them by New Year's Day.

The Emancipation Proclamation represented a sea change in Lincoln's view of the Civil War. What began as a military conflict to preserve the Union now also became a struggle to free the slaves. Lincoln confirmed these aims in his Gettysburg Address when he called on the American people to commit to a "new birth of freedom" to give meaning to the sacrifice of the dead Union soldiers as well as to make democracy more inclusive.

Few realize, however, that when the Emancipation Proclamation went into effect on January 1, 1863, it exempted the four border states as well as Tennessee and 13 parishes (or counties) in Louisiana which were by then controlled by the Union. Nor did the executive order affect West Virginia, which had seceded from Virginia. Thus, Lincoln consciously refused to free slaves in those states where he had the authority to do so fearing that he'd lose their loyalty.

Instead, the Emancipation Proclamation applied only to the Confederate states that continued to resist the federal government and where Lincoln had no coercive power or, arguably, the authority to enforce the measure.

Excoriated as a "dictator" by the South as well as by the Democratic opposition in Congress, Lincoln legitimized the measure under his constitutional war powers. He reasoned that if the slaves living in the Confederate states were freed they'd no longer be able to work on plantations or to assist on the battlefield, thereby weakening the rebel war effort.

Still, Lincoln realized that unless he managed to push through Congress a constitutional amendment abolishing slavery, his executive order would expire when the Civil War ended. As a result, he spent the balance of his presidency lobbying a reluctant Congress to pass the Thirteenth Amendment. To his credit, he succeeded shortly before his death on April 15, 1865.

Abraham Lincoln's genius was his timing. He understood that he could not affect emancipation without Congress or public opinion on his side.

To that end, he moved in a steady but calculated manner, stretching the limits of his constitutional authority, preparing the American people for a "new birth of freedom," and finally procuring the Congressional votes he needed to make emancipation the law of the land. And in that was sealed the freedom of many and the reputation of one.

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