

Lincoln and the Road to Emancipation

William D. Clift
Social Sciences
The University of Wisconsin-Platteville
1 University Plaza
Platteville, WI 53818 USA

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Melissa Gormley

Abstract

Within historical memory, Abraham Lincoln is forever linked as the creator of the Emancipation Proclamation. There were other influences and internal conflicts that influenced this important document. This research project examines Abraham Lincoln and the passing of the Emancipation Proclamation through the eyes of Lincoln and his subordinates. This paper is not just about Lincoln, but the people that influenced him and made this monumental piece of literature a reality. Beyond Lincoln's emancipation, this project explores Lincoln's influences and his confidants with whom he entrusted his feelings and concerns to about the state of the union in 1862. The Emancipation Proclamation made waves in the North and South. Yet despite the opposition by the Southern States, Lincoln was able to piece together a work of art that served as a psychological turning point for Northerners that would change the attitude of the Civil War. The foundation for emancipation began early in Lincoln's career with his position on the issue of slavery. The Emancipation Proclamation was in the making four years prior to its completion. The early information about Lincoln's views comes from his Illinois Senatorial Campaign in 1858. The paper then proceeds to March of 1862 where the proclamation and Lincoln's fears over abolishing slavery started to take shape. The research analyzes the people Lincoln trusted most, and how much they truly knew about the Emancipation Proclamation. In addition there is another group of people that the paper analyzes; they are people who claimed Lincoln showed them a first draft. Lincoln played the idea of emancipation close to the chest, so the research looks to solidify the possibility of these people knowing any information. This project is centered on events that coincided with journal entries that claimed Lincoln entrusted them with revising his proclamation. This paper looks at first-person narratives through a lens of intellectual history and philosophy and checks for discrepancies to try and piece together the true events that led to the Emancipation Proclamation. The accounts were of people who claimed that Lincoln opened up to them about freeing the slaves by proclamation as early as seven months prior to the Battle of Antietam. Along with these accounts there are other sources that accredited many of these accounts to ensure the validity of the events in my paper.

Keywords: **Lincoln, Emancipation Proclamation, Slavery**

1. Body of Paper

On September 23, 1862 President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation. This proclamation changed the course of the Civil War. Lincoln did not accomplish this feat alone. Although he completed the document after countless hours of authoring and revising, many cabinet members and others close to the president influenced Lincoln and the final product. The Emancipation Proclamation was born out of countless hours of arguments and rough drafts. This essay will analyze Lincoln, the events and influences that made this a momentous decision, and the Emancipation Proclamation itself.

Before directly discussing the Proclamation, an examination of its origins is required. Lincoln had always detested slavery and he openly condemned slavery early in his political career. “In the opening speech of his Senatorial campaign in Chicago he said on July 10 ‘I have always hated slavery, I think as much as any abolitionist.’ On October 7 in Galesburg, Lincoln stated, ‘Now, I confess myself as belonging to the class in the country who contemplate slavery as a moral, social, and political evil and desire a policy that looks to the prevention of it as a wrong.’”¹ Lincoln professed his abhorrence for the institution openly to the people of Illinois during the Senate race of 1858. He clearly wanted to come up with a policy that would limit the spread of slavery in the United States and thereby kill the institution. From his earliest political speeches up until the 1860 election, Lincoln had a single objective: “[as] Stated in his Peoria speech, Lincoln believed that the 1820 Missouri Compromise legislation, with its prohibition ‘forever’ upon slavery in the remaining, unorganized Louisiana Territory must be restored.”² Lincoln envisioned a free soil west. At this time only the extreme politicians were calling for absolute abolition. Lincoln was part of the newly formed Republican Party, and wanted to appeal to Northerners to work against the spread of slavery. “Never did he argue for any political action against slavery in any state.”³ The expansion and abolition of slavery was highly controversial and Lincoln could not afford to take any radical stand on slavery. This gave people the impression that he supported a conservative policy. “The two Proclamations, of September 22, 1862 and January 1, 1863, are generally regarded as marking a sharp change in Lincoln’s policy from a conservative to a liberal policy, and, indeed, as changing the character of the war.”⁴ The Proclamation was a change in Lincoln’s publicly stated policy. Lincoln had to walk a very fine line early in his administration to avoid alienating Border States and the many Northerners who would not have fought a war to free the slaves in 1861. Lincoln changed his policy because the war was not going well for the North.

Movement on the slavery issue as a component of the war began in 1862; the South began to negotiate for European intervention in the war on their behalf. At some time Lincoln began to entertain the idea of compensated emancipation, a federal action in which the government would pay slave owners to give up their slaves. “On March 26, 1862 he [Lincoln] sent to congress a special message, recommending the adoption of the joint resolution that the United States would cooperate with any State which might adopt gradual emancipation, giving such State compensation for all inconveniences produced by the change of any system within its confines.”⁵ Lincoln believed that compensated emancipation was an acceptable compromise as well as the only way the Border States would willingly give up their slaves. “Lincoln had figured out that less than the cost of war for half a day would pay for all the slaves in Delaware at \$400 each, and less than eighty seven days’ cost of the war would compensate slave owners of Delaware, Maryland, the District of Columbia, Kentucky, and Missouri for all the slaves at the same rate.”⁶ By this point, the war had lasted longer than anyone had expected and getting increasingly destructive. Lincoln calculated that a compensated emancipation would be cheaper than continued warfare. Unfortunately, not a single border state accepted compensated emancipation, forcing Lincoln to search for other actions. In July of 1862, the Confiscation Act, which would come to be known as the Second Confiscation Act was passed through Congress. It was “An act to suppress insurrection and to punish treason and rebellion, to seize and confiscate property of rebels for other purposes.”⁷ The Second Confiscation Act allowed the Union to seize slaves for use in the Union Army, but did nothing to free or emancipate slaves. “According to this new law, the president was supposed to issue a proclamation that would establish a sixty day period after which rebel property (including slaves) was declared liable for seizure by the Federal Government.”⁸ According to the Act, a proclamation was imminent, but because the Union was losing the war at this point, such a proclamation might have appeared to be a desperate measure on the part of the Federals. An uncertain Lincoln pondered the appropriateness of emancipation at this time, but he knew that a decision would have to be made at some point. “This new law [The Emancipation Act] promised that all slaves thus seized by Union forces would be forever free, it appears that Lincoln (who worried about the constitutionality of this and other provisions) then felt obligated to address the question of emancipation on his own.”⁹ When Lincoln took the oath of office, he swore to protect the Constitution. As such, Lincoln made sure the Constitution reigned above all, and that every measure he took was within its boundaries. Lincoln was unsure of the constitutionality of congressional or presidential emancipation, and he did not want to give the Democratic Party ammunition to use against his activity. To complicate matters, the Second Confiscation Act lacked authority, because the various generals of the Union amply acted upon their own beliefs when they dealt with runaway slaves. There was no cohesion in standard operating procedures within the Union Army.

At this point in the summer of 1862, Lincoln found himself in a precarious situation. Under pressure to abolish slavery, Lincoln needed a balance between upholding the constitution and protecting the Union. “Lincoln saw the necessity for uniting the sentiment of the North for a practical solution of the slavery problem. Looking forward into the future, therefore, Lincoln readily realized that the North must present a united front contending for a plain, practical policy relative to things both politically and militarily.”¹⁰ This new mindset prompted Lincoln to abandon

compensated emancipation and utilize the entirety of his resources as president, including the executive authority to issue the total emancipation of slaves. "After the refusal of compensated emancipation by the border slave states the President decided to emancipate the slaves of rebellious commonwealths by military order."¹¹ To avoid spontaneous rebellion in the Border States, Lincoln informed them multiple times, of the potential for more dramatic actions on his part to abolish slavery. He kept the actual plan for military emancipation to himself and a very few trusted individuals. "Mr. Lincoln made mention of emancipating the slaves by proclamation, if the rebels did not lay down their arms. He believed that such action could be guaranteed only as a military necessity. He thought that the slaves must be liberated, or the Union would be exterminated."¹² This marked the first mention of what would later be known as the Emancipation Proclamation by President Lincoln, who at last resolved that slavery had to be eradicated for the Union to move forward. Lincoln still possessed reservations concerning the constitutionality of military emancipation, but looked towards military necessity as his way of procuring that right.

Between late summer and early fall of 1862, the Union Army won no decisive victories, and Lincoln acknowledged that something radical had to occur to prevent European intervention in the war on behalf of the Confederacy. "One day on his customary visit to the War Department Lincoln asked the office personal for some paper on which to write something special."¹³ Lincoln may have used this time at the War Department, away from the bustle of his office to draft the Emancipation Proclamation. He frequently used the pattern of writing at the War Department for several weeks. Historians and politicians in their time speculated about the "where" and "how" of Lincoln's writing of the document and wondered who was privy to the knowledge. Vice President Hamlin made claim that Lincoln told him of his plan to emancipate the slaves by proclamation. According to Hamlin, "You have been repeatedly urging me to issue a proclamation of emancipation free the slaves. I have concluded to yield to your advice in the matter and that of other friends, at the same time, as I may say, following my own judgment."¹⁴ Vice President Hamlin recalled a conversation in private, with Lincoln, where the President told him of his plan to emancipate the slaves. These records were the first account of anyone in Lincoln's cabinet becoming aware of his plan. After the death of Secretary of War Stanton's infant son, Lincoln had some alone time with Secretary of the Navy Welles, and Secretary of State Seward. "It was during this ride, that Lincoln first mentioned his proposed emancipation proclamation to these highly placed advisors."¹⁵ Due to Lincoln's concern with the constitutionality of military emancipation, he chose to inform his Cabinet members to ascertain their honest opinions. Lincoln did not want any one member to sway the other's opinion and in turn rush into a proclamation. "The formal solicitation of advice from the Cabinet came at the meeting on July 22. The president informed the Cabinet that he had resolved to issue a proclamation emancipating the slaves. His decision in the matter was firm, he assured them. He therefore called them together to inform them and to solicit their suggestions regarding language and timing."¹⁶ This was the first formal, official statement from Lincoln about the Emancipation Proclamation, and also the first request for help in drafting the document. However, the announcement of the proclamation proved difficult. The success of the South on the battlefield might lead the public to see the proclamation as Union desperation. Secretary of State Seward offered Lincoln advice: "An Emancipation Proclamation issued at this time may be viewed as last measure of an exhausted government, a cry for help, the government stretching forth her hands to Ethiopia, instead of Ethiopia stretching forth her hands to the government."¹⁷ The North wanted to make sure that no one intervened on the side of the Confederacy, and issuance of the proclamation at this low time in Union fortune could convince a European Power to that the North was giving near failure. "Seward suggested that the matter be postponed until you can give it to the country supported by military success, attended by fife and drum and public spirit."¹⁸ After consideration, Lincoln heeded Seward's advice and waited until a military victory by the Union Army could lay foundation for the Emancipation Proclamation's staggering historical importance.

On September 22, 1862 Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation after the Battle of Antietam. This early proclamation has come to be known as the Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, as it lacked any real legal power until signed into law. The Emancipation Proclamation was officially signed into law January 1st, 1863, freeing the slaves in states rebelling against the Union. The preliminary Emancipation Proclamation was "A package document containing both something old and something new. Lincoln, as President and Commander-in-Chief of the Army and Navy, reiterated the restoration of the Union as his object of the war, promised to urge Congress again to provide for compensated emancipation, the voluntary colonization of the Negro, and promised compensation to loyal citizens for war losses incurred by acts of the United States. In addition two acts prohibited the return of fugitive slaves by members of armed services, and on January 1st all people held as slaves in states that are still in rebellion against the United States shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free."¹⁹ The date it went into effect, January 1st 1863, was important because it left some more time for the Senate to accept Lincoln's compensated emancipation, which Lincoln still believed would be the best way to free the slaves. However, even after the preliminary emancipation, no state chose to accept compensated emancipation. "The *New York Times* predicted that when January 1 came, the

Negro would seek protection of the Union lines in increasing numbers. This in turn would cause a disorganization of Southern agriculture, followed by a sense of insecurity which would draw the Confederate Soldier home to protect his family. The Times concluded with, how much wise for the vast future it would be a rational return by the cotton states to the Union.”²⁰ By delaying the effective date of the Emancipation Lincoln hoped that the Confederate States would come to their senses, lay down their arms and return to the Union. Unfortunately, during the one hundred days wait for the final proclamation, division over the proposal became more intense. “In the Border States there was a struggle between the Emancipationists and the Anti-Emancipationists. In Pennsylvania and the northwestern states, fear of Negro immigration caused by Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation, coupled with ensuing competition between races for jobs. Looming above all was the failure of the administration to successfully bring the war to a close.”²¹ Many in the North harbored reservations with freeing the slaves. Some of the northern states had Germans and Irish immigrants who found competition with freed slaves for jobs. An even bigger concern in the North was the lack of a clear end to the war, which greatly distressed the Democratic Party, and caused a deep drop in Northern morale. “Opinions overseas were swinging more and more to the North because the masses now recognized that the war was being fought for free labor.”²² Such optimistic news was crucial to the North’s war effort. By staving off the possibility of foreign intervention, the North found itself poised to achieve victory.

“As the time for the Final Proclamation approached, letter, petitions, and resolutions of endorsements from all over the Union, as well as abroad, began to come in increasing numbers.”²³ Over the one hundred days from the preliminary to the final proclamation, people discussed and deliberated all sides of the issue. Emancipationists as well as Anti-Emancipationists fervently argued their points before the final passage. “The Ultra-Republicans pressed Lincoln to place the Emancipation Proclamation on high moral ground testifying the Negroes’ right to freedom as had been done by the emancipationists of Old and New England. Lincoln explained that the policy required that the proclamation proceed as a war measure.”²⁴ Lincoln had to stay within the bounds of the Constitution, and the only way to issue this proclamation was as a limited war measure, many Ultra-Republicans and Abolitionists were disappointed by the practical language and the failure of the document to emphasize moral insights. The final proclamation did endure alterations from its original form, the largest of which dealt with how Lincoln ended the final proclamation. “Lincoln closes the document by qualifying it as an act of justice, warranted by the Constitution, upon military necessity, invoking upon it the considerate judgment of mankind and the gracious favor of the Almighty. Lincoln knew that this measure was imperative to end the war in the Union’s favor.

The Emancipation Proclamation grew out of the failure of gradual manumission strategy and the Confiscation Acts. It constituted a turning point in the Civil War. As a result, the war aims of each side shifted—the South, ended by fighting for slavery and Southern Independence, while the North ended by fighting for freedom and preservation of the Union. Southern Independence and slavery became linked intrinsically, while preservation of the Union became imprinted on the mind as the aim of the North. By passing this proclamation and forcing the South to essentially battle for slavery, Lincoln and his advisors converted the war into one for freedom and the future, kept Europe from assisting in the South’s war effort, and steeled the Union’s resolve to create an enhanced United States of America. Because of this proclamation, the war had a clear, coherent purpose.

2. acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. Melissa Gormley for her unwavering support throughout the writing and submission process. Dr. Del Carey for helping to get this project started. Finally to the University of Wisconsin-Platteville History Department.

3. References

1 Martin M. Krug “Lincoln. The Republican Party, and the Emancipation Proclamation” *The History Teacher* 1973. 53. (www.jstor.com).

2 Henry V. Jaffa “The Emancipation Proclamation”. *100 Years of Emancipation* University of Chicago 1963. 6.

3 Jaffa, “The Emancipation Proclamation.” 6.

4 *Ibid.* 5.

-
- 5 Harry S. Blackiston "Lincoln's Emancipation Plan" *Journal of Negro History* 1922 pg 267 (www.jstor.org).
- 6 Blackiston. "Lincoln's Emancipation Plan" 267-268.
- 7 Matthew Pinsker, *Lincoln and Freedom; Slavery, Emancipation, and the Thirteenth Amendment* (Southern Illinois University 2007). 80.
- 8 Pinsker. *Lincoln and Freedom; Slavery, Emancipation, and the Thirteenth*. 80.
- 9 *Ibid.* 80-81.
- 10 Blackiston. "Lincoln's Emancipation Plan. 272.
- 11 *Ibid.* 272.
- 12 *Ibid.* 273.
- 13 John H. Franklin. *The Emancipation Proclamation* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company 1963). 35.
- 14 Franklin. *The Emancipation Proclamation*. 37.
- 15 *Ibid.* 35.
- 16 *Ibid.* 39.
- 17 *Ibid.* 43.
- 18 *Ibid.* 43.
- 19 Roland C. McConnell "From Preliminary to Final Emancipation Proclamation: The First Hundred Days" *The Journal of Negro History* (1963) 260 (www.jstor.com).
- 20 McConnell, "From Preliminary to Final Emancipation Proclamation: The First Hundred Days." 264.
- 21 *Ibid.* 273.
- 22 *Ibid.* 273.
- 23 *Ibid.* 273.
- 24 *Ibid.* 274.