Did Abraham Lincoln Free the Slaves?


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ISSUE SUMMARY

YES: Allen Guelzo insists that Abraham Lincoln was committed to freeing the nation's slaves from the day of his inauguration and that, by laying the foundation for liberating some four million African Americans held in bondage, the Emancipation Proclamation represents the most epochal of Lincoln's writings.

NO: Vincent Harding credits slaves themselves for engaging in a dramatic movement of self-liberation while Abraham Lincoln initially refused to declare the destruction of slavery as a war aim and then issued the Emancipation Proclamation, which failed to free any slaves in areas over which he had any authority.

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In April 1861, less than a month after his inauguration, President Abraham Lincoln attempted to send provisions to Fort Sumter, a federal military installation nestled in the harbor of Charleston, South Carolina, part of the newly formed Confederate States of America. Southern troops under the command of General P. G. T. Beauregard opened fire on the fort, forcing its surrender on April 14. The American Civil War had begun.

Numerous explanations have been offered for the cause of this "war between the states." Many contemporaries and some historians saw the conflict as the product of a conspiracy housed either in the North or South, depending upon one's regional perspective. For many in the northern states, the chief culprits were the planters and their political allies who were willing to defend southern institutions at all costs. South of the Mason-Dixon line, blame was laid at the feet of fanatical abolitionists and the free-soil architects of the Republican party. Some viewed secession and war as the consequence of a constitutional struggle between states’ rights advocates and defenders of the federal government, while others focused upon the economic rivalries or the cultural differences between North and South. Embedded in each of these interpretations, however, is the powerful influence of the institution of slavery.

Abraham Lincoln fully understood the role slavery had played in the outbreak of the Civil War. In March 1865, as the war was nearing its end, he presented the following analysis: "One eighth of the whole population [in 1861] was colored slaves, not distributed generally over the Union, but localized in the southern part of it. These slaves constituted a peculiar and powerful interest. All knew that this interest was somehow the cause of the war. To strengthen, perpetuate, and extend this interest was the object [of the South] ..., while the [North] ... claimed no right to do more than to restrict the territorial enlargement of it."

In light of Lincoln’s recognition of the role slavery played in the clash between North and South, none should find it surprising that the Emancipation Proclamation, which the President issued, established a policy to end slavery. Hence, the demise of slavery became a war aim, and Lincoln seemed to have earned his place in history as "the Great Emancipator." Upon learning of the president’s announcement, the fugitive slave and abolitionist Frederick Douglass was ecstatic. "We shout for joy," he declared, "that we live to record this righteous decree."

But Douglass had not always been so encouraged by Lincoln's commitment to
freedom. Lincoln was not an abolitionist by any stretch of the imagination, but Douglass was convinced that the Republican victory in the presidential election of 1860 had brought to the White House a leader with a deserved reputation as an antislavery man. That confidence declined, however, in the early months of Lincoln's presidency as Douglass and other abolitionists lobbied for emancipation during the secession crisis and, when the war began, as a military necessity only to have their demands fall on deaf ears. Lincoln consistently avoided any public pronouncements that would suggest his desire to end slavery as a war aim. The priority was preserving the Union, and Lincoln did not view emancipation as essential to that goal.

Until the president changed his course, it appeared that the slaves would have to free themselves. This is precisely what some scholars insist happened. Southern slaves, they argue, became the key agents for liberation by abandoning their masters, undermining the plantation routine, serving as spies for Union troops, and taking up arms against the Confederacy. Black northerners pitched in as well by enlisting in the United States Army to defeat the Confederacy and end slavery.

The question "Who freed the slaves?" is the focus of the following essays. Allen Guelzo portrays Lincoln as a president deeply committed to ending slavery. The Emancipation Proclamation was drafted as an emergency measure to substitute for the slower process of a long-term legislative solution in the midst of the Civil War. Coupled with the Thirteenth Amendment, which had Lincoln's support prior to his assassination, this action laid a firm foundation for sounding the death knell to the slave system in the South. For Vincent Harding, credit for the end of slavery belongs to the masses of slaves who sought self-liberation by running away from their masters, undermining plantation operations, engaging in local insurrections, and offering their services to the Union army and navy.

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YES
Allen C. Guelzo

Introduction

The Emancipation Proclamation is surely the unhappiest of all of Abraham Lincoln's great presidential papers. Taken at face value, the Emancipation Proclamation was the most revolutionary pronouncement ever signed by an American president, striking the legal shackles from four million black slaves and setting the nation's face toward the total abolition of slavery within three more years. Today, however, the Proclamation is probably best known for what it did not do, beginning with its apparent failure to rise to the level of eloquence Lincoln achieved in the Gettysburg Address or the Second Inaugural. Even in the 1860s, Karl Marx, the author of a few proclamations of his own, found that the language of the Proclamation, with its ponderous *whereases* and *therefores*, reminded him of "ordinary summonses sent by one lawyer to another on the opposing side." When the Lincoln Memorial was dedicated in 1922, quotations from the Second Inaugural and the Gettysburg Address flanked the great Daniel Chester French statue of the seated Lincoln, but there was no matching quotation from the Proclamation, only a vague, elliptical representation in Jules Guerin's mural, Emancipation of a Race, which was mostly lost to sight near the ceiling of one of the memorial's side chambers.

But the unkindest cut at the Proclamation came from the hands of Columbia University
Historian Richard Hofstadter, in his essay on “Lincoln in The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It” (1948). A onetime member of the circle of American Marxist intellectuals around Partisan Review, Hofstadter repudiated the traditional Progressive view of American political history as a struggle between the legacies of the liberal Thomas Jefferson and the conservative Alexander Hamilton. Instead, Hofstadter viewed American politics as a single, consistent, and deeply cynical story of how capitalism had corrupted Jeffersonians and Hamiltonians alike and turned the United States into “a democracy of cupidity rather than a democracy of fraternity.” But he reserved his angriest words for Lincoln and for the Emancipation Proclamation. Lincoln's opposition to slavery, in Hofstadter's reckoning, was kindled only by the threat it posed to free white labor and the development of industrial capitalism. Lincoln “was, as always, thinking primarily of the free white worker” and was “never much troubled about the Negro.” No one, then, should be fooled by the Proclamation. Its motives were entirely other than had been advertised, and that fact explained its stylistic flaccidity. “Had the political strategy of the moment called for a momentous human document of the stature of the Declaration of Independence, Lincoln could have risen to the occasion.” Instead, what he composed on New Year's Day, 1863, "had all the moral grandeur of a bill of lading." It accomplished nothing because it was intended to accomplish nothing "beyond its propaganda value."

The influence of Hofstadter's easily repeatable quip about "the moral grandeur of a bill of lading" has had long innings, and even the most favorably disposed of modem Lincoln biographers have found themselves forced to concede that the Proclamation "lacked the memorable rhetoric of his most notable utterances." And perhaps for that reason, no serious study of the Proclamation has appeared since John Hope Franklin's brief The Emancipation Proclamation in 1963, written for its centennial. (That centennial itself was a disappointing affair, capped by President John F. Kennedy's refusal to give the principal address at ceremonies at the Lincoln Memorial on September 22, 1963, for fear of suffering deeper losses of Southern Democrats in his reelection bid the next year.) As the Proclamation's negative symbolic power has risen, efforts to interpret the text have diminished, and examination of the Proclamation’s contents has subsided into offhand guesswork and angry prejudice. The Proclamation has become a document (as Garry Wills once described the Declaration of Independence) "dark with unexamined lights." As with Jefferson's Declaration, we have lost in the cultural eddies of the last hundred and forty years the assumptions that would make the Emancipation Proclamation readable.

Recapturing at least some of those assumptions will begin, I think, with recognizing in Abraham Lincoln our last Enlightenment politician. The contours of Lincoln's mind--his allegiance to "reason, cold, calculating, unimpassioned reason"; his aversion to the politics of passion; the distance he maintained from organized religion; his affection for Shakespeare, Paine, and Robert Burns; and his unquestioning belief in universal natural rights--were all shaped by the hand of the Enlightenment. But the most important among the Enlightenment's political virtues for Lincoln, and for his Proclamation, was prudence.

Prudence carries with it today the connotation of "prude"--a person of exaggerated caution, bland temperance, hesitation, a lack of imagination and will, fearfulness, and a bad case of mincing steps. This view would have surprised the classical philosophers, who thought of prudence as one of the four cardinal virtues and who linked it to shrewdness, exceptionally good judgment, and the gift of coup d'oeil--the "coup of the eye"-which could take in the whole of a situation at once and know almost automatically how to proceed.
Among political scientists, it has more specific meanings, but those meanings are usually just as repellent--of cunning, realpolitik, and in some quarters, an unhealthy preoccupation with the neo-classicism of Leo Strauss. (So let me say, for the benefit of the hunters of subtexts, that I can cheerfully confess to never having read Leo Strauss, nor, for that matter, to possessing much aptitude for the peculiar dialect spoken by my political science friends.) It is an ironic rather than a tragic attitude, in which the calculus of costs is critical rather than crucial or incidental. It prefers incremental progress to categorical solutions and fosters that progress through the offering of motives rather than expecting to change dispositions. Yet, unlike mere moderation, it has a sense of purposeful motion and declines to be paralyzed by a preoccupation with process, even while it remains aware that there is no goal so easily attained or so fully attained that it rationalizes dispensing with process altogether. Montesquieu found the origins of political greatness in "prudence, wisdom, perseverance, since prudence would "guard the passions of individuals for the sake of order and guard the guardians for the sake of freedom." In the new American republic, James Madison argued (in the forty-third of the Federalist Papers) for ratification of the 1787 Constitution on the grounds of "the rights of humanity," the "considerations of a common interest," and on "prudence." So also for Lincoln: The practice of politics involved the rule of prudence, and "obeying the dictates of prudence" was as important for Lincoln as obeying "the obligations of law." He hoped, as president, that "it will appear that we have practiced prudence," and in 1861, he promised that the management of the Civil War would be "done consistently with the prudence... which ought always to regulate the public service" and without allowing the war to degenerate "into a violent and remorseless revolutionary struggle."

It is this politics of prudence which opens up for us a way to understand Lincoln's strategy in "the mighty experiment" of emancipation. The most salient feature to emerge from the sixteen months between his inauguration and the first presentation of the Proclamation to his cabinet on July 22, 1862, is the consistency with which Lincoln's face was set toward the goal of emancipation from the day he first took the presidential oath. Lincoln was not exaggerating when he claimed in 1858 that he "hated" 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, and especially because it forces so many really good men amongst ourselves into an open war with the very fundamental principles of civil liberty--criticizing the Declaration of Independence, and insisting that there is no right principle of action but self-interest.

But in Lincoln's case, prudence demanded that he balance the integrity of ends (the elimination of slavery) with the integrity of means (his oath to uphold the Constitution and his near-religious reverence for the rule of law). Lincoln understood emancipation not as the satisfaction of a "spirit" overriding the law, nor as the moment of fusion between the Constitution and absolute moral theory, but as a goal to be achieved through prudential means, so that worthwhile consequences might result. He could not be persuaded that emancipation required the headlong abandonment of everything save the single absolute of
abolition, or that purity of intention was all that mattered, or that the exercise of the will rather than the reason was the best ethical foot forward.

Far too often, Lincoln's apologists hope to give the lie to Hofstadter's scalding attack by pulling apart means and ends, either apologizing for the former or explaining away the latter, a sure sign that they have no better grasp on the politics of prudence than Hofstadter. Most often, this pulling apart happens whenever we are tempted to plead that Lincoln was either a man in progress or a man of patience. That is, Lincoln was (as Horace Greeley put it) "a growing man," growing in this case from a stance of moral indifference and ignorance about emancipation at the time of his election in 1860, toward deep conviction about African-American freedom by the time of the Emancipation Proclamation less than two years later. Or else that Lincoln already had all the racial goodwill necessary for emancipation but had to wait until the right moment in the war or the right moment in the growth of Northern acceptance of the idea of emancipation. These are both generous sentiments, but I am not sure that generosity is quite what is needed for understanding Lincoln's proclamation. Rather than needing to develop progress, I believe that Abraham Lincoln understood from the first that his administration was the beginning of the end of slavery and that he could not leave office without some form of legislative emancipation policy in place. By his design, the burden would have to rest mainly on the state legislatures, largely because Lincoln mistrusted the federal judiciary and expected that any emancipation initiatives which came directly from his hand would be struck down in the courts. This mistrust is also what lies behind another curiosity: Lincoln's rebuffs to the covert emancipations that Congress constructed under the cover of the two Confiscation Acts (of August 1861 and July 1862), he "contraband" theory confected by the ingenious Benjamin Butler, and he two martial-law emancipation proclamations attempted by John Charles Fremont and David Hunter. Lincoln ignored the Confiscation Acts, showed no interest in Butler's "contraband" theory, and actually revoked the martial-law proclamations--not because he was indifferent to emancipation, but because he was convinced (and with good reason) that none of these methods would survive challenges in federal court.

But why, if he was attuned so scrupulously to the use of the right legal means for emancipation, did Lincoln turn in the summer of 1862 and issue an Emancipation Proclamation-which was, for all practical purposes, the very sort of martial-law dictum he had twice before canceled? The answer can be summed up in one word: time. It seems clear to me that Lincoln recognized by July 1862 that he could not wait for the legislative option--and not because he had patiently waited to discern public opinion and found the North readier than the state legislatures to move ahead. If anything, Northern public opinion remained loudly and frantically hostile to the prospect of emancipation, much less emancipation by presidential decree. Instead of exhibiting patience, Lincoln felt stymied by the unanticipated stubbornness with which even Unionist slaveholders refused to cooperate with the mildest legislative emancipation policy he could devise, and threatened by generals who were politically committed to a negotiated peace. (We usually underrate the menace posed by the generals, largely because, in the end, it did not materialize, but on at least some level, Lincoln feared that emancipation risked triggering a military coup d'etat by General George McClellan and the Army of the Potomac.) Thus Lincoln's Proclamation was one of the biggest political gambles in American history.

But gambles are not necessarily inconsistent with prudence, and Lincoln's gamble may be considered a prudent one for the role that providence came to play in it. For a man with
such a vague religious profile, Lincoln nevertheless understood that a significant part of the politics of prudence involved a deference to *providence*—whether one defined providence as the work of an active and interventionist God or merely the forces of history, economics or ideas.

Lincoln was raised in an environment saturated with notions of providential determinism, beginning with his upbringing among the "hard-shell" Separate Baptists. As he did with so much else in his upbringing, Lincoln lost what little faith he might have had, and he acquired more notoriety than was good for an ambitious young politico in Illinois as an "infidel." It was an Enlightenment infidelity, a rationalistic deism stoked in equal parts by the smile of Voltaire and the arguments of Tom Paine. But even then, Lincoln's unbelief had this much still in common with the Calvinism he had forsaken--both subscribed alike to the notion that all events were determined by forces beyond human power.

This is not the most optimistic way of looking at the world, but it can lend a certain confidence to one's plans if the direction in which determinism is pointing also happens to be the upward path you are following. Lincoln, like so many other secular determinists shaped by the Enlightenment's delight with the idea of a mechanically predictable universe--Thomas Henry Buckle, Karl Marx, Adolphe Quetelet, Pierre Laplace--thought that progress, improvement, and invention were written into the script of human affairs beyond the power of human effacement. And that meant, from Lincoln's vantage point, that an institution as hateful and retrograde as slavery had to be as inalterably doomed as superstition and tyranny. Whatever the occasional wrong moves--the economic surge of the cotton South, the overthrow of the safeguards against slavery's expansion by the Kansas-Nebraska Act, even the Civil War itself--the fundamental direction of events was inevitable and required only a certain amount of machinery--tending to put things back on the rails.

The carnage, the stalemate, and the incomprehensible rebel victories of the War's first year conspired to strip Lincoln of his optimism in the natural, pleasant ascent of progress, but not of his fundamental belief in providence. Instead, the war saw him veer away from a providence defined by indifference and the iron law of cause and effect, and back toward the providence of a mysterious and self-concealing God whose will for the human future did not necessarily move according to the sweet and logical processes of progress. And in the case of emancipation, Lincoln came to see the Proclamation as the only alternative God had left to emancipation being swept off the table entirely.

All the same, Lincoln never intended the Proclamation to be a substitute for a long-term legislative solution, and in fact, that hope for a legislative solution eventually bore fruit as the Thirteenth Amendment. The Proclamation was an emergency measure, a substitute for the permanent plan that would really rid the country of slavery, but a substitute as sincere and profound as the timbers that shore up an endangered mine shaft and prevent it from collapsing entirely.

Understanding prudence as the key to Lincoln's political behavior gives us the "big picture" behind the Emancipation Proclamation. It does not speak automatically to four very specific questions about the Emancipation Proclamation that I am asked nearly everywhere I go. First and most frequent is the Hofstadter Question: "*Why is the language of the Proclamation so bland and legalistic?*" The answer, I think, really should be obvious, and it was not because Lincoln wrote the Proclamation grudgingly and of necessity. Very simply: The Proclamation is a legal document, and legal documents cannot afford very much in the way of flourishes. They have work to do. In this instance, we are dealing with a document
with a very great deal of it to do, and one which had to be composed with the understanding that every syllable was liable to the most concentrated legal parsing by the federal court system. If it falls short of the eloquence of the Gettysburg Address, I only have to point out that the Gettysburg Address was not a document anyone could take into court, and at least in legal terms, it was not intended to accomplish anything. In other words, Lincoln could afford eloquence at Gettysburg; he could not in the Proclamation.

The second question is linked to the Hofstadter question, if only because Hofstadter believed, wrongly, that a linkage between the two existed: “Did the Proclamation actually do anything?” Because the Proclamation limited emancipation only to the states or parts of states still in rebellion and did not include the slaves in the four loyal slave states--Delaware, Maryland, Kentucky, and Missouri--it has been easy to lampoon the Proclamation as a puff of political air. But laws are not the less laws merely because circumstances render them inoperative at a given time or place. I should be ashamed to offer myself as an example, but I do so only because it will force Lincoln's critics to examine their own terms: Every day that I traveled between Paoli and Princeton, I took liberties with the speed limit which the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and the State of New Jersey forbid. (Judging from the abandon with which other drivers flew past me, most of my readers, it is safe to say, are doubtless implicated in similar offenses.) The guardians of the turnpike might have lacked the energy, the technology, or even the power to enforce the legislated speed limits, but they certainly possessed the perfect and unimpaired authority to do so, as I would have discovered if ever once they had gotten me to stop. The same is true with Lincoln and the Proclamation. Lincoln may not have had the power available to him to free every slave in the Confederacy, but he certainly had the authority, and in law, the authority is as good as the power. The proof is in the pudding: No slave declared free by the Proclamation was ever returned to slavery once he or she had made it to the safety of Union-held territory.

This raises a related question: “Did the slaves free themselves?” In 1979, Leon Utwack laid the foundations for an alternative view of emancipation when he urged historians to regard emancipation not as an event beginning and ending with Lincoln but as a process in which pressure was exerted on Lincoln and Congress by the slaves themselves. By running away, by labor sabotage, and by volunteering to serve the Union armies, the slaves forced Lincoln's hand toward emancipation. But looked at in the larger context of nineteenth-century American race relations, the "self-emancipation" thesis asks for too great a suspension of disbelief. Without the legal freedom conferred first by the Emancipation Proclamation, no runaway would have remained "self-emancipated" for very long. The files on the first year and a half of the war bulge with accounts of thwarted slaveowners with court papers in their hands and sheriffs at their sides, stalking through the camps of Union regiments in pursuit of slave runaways as though a barbecue rather than a war was in progress. Without the Proclamation, the Confederacy even in defeat would have retained legal title to its slaves, and there is little in the oppressive patters of coercion Southerners employed before the Civil War or afterward in Reconstruction to suggest that they would not have been willing to reclaim as many of their self-emancipated runaways as they could; and if the record of the federal courts in the post-Civil War decades is any proof, the courts would probably have helped them.

In the same skeptical spirit, a fourth question is frequently aimed at the intentions behind the Proclamation: “Did Lincoln issue the Proclamation only to ward off European intervention or inflate Union morale?” To this, I can only say that if intervention and morale
were Lincoln's primary concerns, then an Emancipation Proclamation was probably the worst method, and at the worst time, with which to have met them. Abroad, there was as much danger that an Emancipation Proclamation would trigger foreign intervention as there was that the Proclamation would discourage it. At home, Pennsylvania politician Alexander McClure warned Lincoln that "political defeat would be inevitable in the great States of the Union in the elections soon to follow if he issued the Emancipation Proclamation." Significantly, Lincoln agreed "as to the political effect of the proclamation." He knew that the Proclamation, for all that he hoped it would forestall the generals and put the Union cause unreservedly on the side of the angels, might just as easily convince them to accelerate plans for an intervention or put Lincoln's administration on the side of the losers. To his surprise, McClure found that this made no dent in Lincoln's determination. Those who have sung in Richard Hofstadter's choir need, as McClure needed, to take a new measure of that determination.

But it is not simply the complexities of Lincoln's mental habits or the difficulty involved in piecing together the circumstances and chronology of Lincoln's decision to emancipate which make the Proclamation so difficult for us to grasp. A good deal of our befuddlement is wrapped up in the way that our notions of political ethics have changed since Lincoln's day. Even as Lincoln emerged onto the national political scene in the 1850s, the politics of prudence that had guided Enlightenment political theory was being devalued in favor of a Romantic politics of ethical absolutism. One source of that absolutism lay close to home for Americans in the radical perfectionism of evangelical Protestant revivalism; another was the influence of Immanuel Kant, mediated through English and American Romantics such as Emerson, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Frederick Augustus Rauch, and James Marsh, the "Vermont Transcendentalist." What the American Romantics particularly admired in Kant was his attempt to locate a source for ethical judgments within men (instead of imposed externally, through divine revelation or natural law), in a "categorical imperative" that yields absolute and universal answers to ethical dilemmas. "We do not need science and philosophy to know what we should do to be honest and good, yea, even wise and virtuous," argued Kant in his Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Morals. What we need to do is obey the imperative. Kant's hope was to be able to isolate moral decisions from the flux of circumstance, culture, and individual experience, and thus escape the threat of moral relativism. He was, in other words, looking for a way out of the mechanistic universe, where ethics is simply a pretty name we give to justify whatever decisions circumstances force upon us. Kant sought to base the right or wrong of things soley on the principle that moved the will to choose one thing over another. Purifying the will trumps the claims of all other values, and willing purely is all that is necessary to overcome injustice. As much as Kant believed in universal rational criteria for ethical behavior, those criteria spoke in (as Isaiah Berlin put it) "the language of inner voices."

It is the convergence of American evangelical absolutism and the ethic of the imperative that, more than anything else, erects a translucent shield between our habits of mind and Lincoln's, passing enough light to make us think we see but not enough to allow us to understand. This is not to say that Lincoln, as a man of the Enlightenment, possessed a superior morality or always did well and right. Nor does it mean that Lincoln was untinged by certain elements of Romanticism himself or that he conforms in precise anticipation to all our American anxieties about race and reconciliation at the beginning of the twenty-first century. It would be special pleading to claim that Lincoln was in the end the most perfect friend black
Americans have ever had. But it would also be the cheapest and most ignorant of skepticisms to deny that he was the most significant. And if the Emancipation Proclamation was not, as Richard Hofstadter so mordantly complained half a century ago, the most eloquent of Lincoln's writings, it was unquestionably the most epochal. It may have had little more "moral grandeur" than a "bill of lading," but Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation was still a bill that itemized the destinies of four millions of human beings, bound in the way of danger for the port of American freedom.

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NO

Vincent Harding

Although the destruction of the oppressors God may not effect by the oppressed, yet the Lord our God will surely bring other destructions upon them-for not infrequently will he cause them to rise up against one another, to be split and divided, and to oppress each other, and sometimes to open hostilities with sword in hand.

-David Walker, 1829

On certain stark and bloody levels, a terrible irony seemed to be at work. For those who interpreted the events of their own times through the wisdom and anguish of the past, the guns of Charleston certainly sounded like the signal for the fulfillment of David Walker's radical prophecies. Here at last was the coming of the righteous God in judgment, preparing to bring "destructions" upon America. Here was the divine culmination of the struggle toward freedom and justice long waged by the oppressed black people. From such a vantage point, the conflict now bursting out was the ultimate justification of the costly freedom movement, a welcome vindication of the trust in Providence. And yet the war was not simply an ally. Like all wars, it brought with it a train of demoralizing, destructive elements, deeply affecting even those persons and causes which seemed to be its chief beneficiaries. In the case of black people, the guns broke in upon their freedom struggle at many levels, diverted and diffused certain of its significant radical elements, and became a source of profound confusion and disarray among its most committed forces. This was especially the case where independent radical black struggle for justice and self-determination was concerned....

When the war broke out, black men and women were convinced that it had to destroy slavery. Especially in the North, this inner certainty flooded their consciousness, buoyed up their hopes. Now it appeared that God was providing a way out of the darkness of slavery and degradation, a way which would release some of the frightening tension of the previous decade. Because they wanted a way out so desperately, because it was hard to be driven by a fierce urgency, fearsome to experience the personal honing in spite of one's own softer and blunter ways, the children of Africa in America clutched at a solution which would not cause them to be driven into the depths of radicalism. For they must have realized that the chances were good that they might not survive without being seriously, unpredictably transformed. Therefore, when the guns began, black people shunted aside the knowledge of certain fierce realities.

In that mood their men surged forward to volunteer for service in the Union cause, repressing bitter memories. In spite of their misgivings, disregarding the fact that it was not the North which had initiated this righteous war, they offered their bodies for the Northern
cause, believing that it was—or would be—the cause of black freedom. If the excited, forgetful young volunteers sought justification, they could find it in the Anglo-African: "Talk as we may, we are concerned in this fight and our fate hangs upon its issues. The South must be subjugated, or we shall be enslaved. In aiding the Federal government in whatever way we can, we are aiding to secure our own liberty; for this war can end only in the subjugation of the North or the South." When hard pressed, the journal, like the young men it encouraged, knew very well the nature of the "liberty" they had found so far in the unsubjugated North, and the writer admitted that the North was not consciously fighting for black rights. However, the Anglo-African chose to see a power beyond the councils of the North: "Circumstances have been so arranged by the decrees of Providence, that in struggling for their own nationality they are forced to defend our rights."...

And what of the South? What of those sometimes God-obsessed black believers who had long lifted their cries for deliverance in songs and shouts, in poetry filled with rich and vibrant images? Did they sense the coming of Moses now? Was this finally the day of the delivering God, when he would set his people free? Did they hear Nat Turner's spirit speaking in the guns? Did they believe he was calling them to freedom through all the lines of skirmishers who left their blood upon the leaves? Did they have any difficulty knowing which of the white armies was Pharaoh's?

The answers were as complex as life itself. In many parts of the nation and the world there had been predictions that secession, disunion, and war would lead to a massive black insurrection which would finally vindicate Turner and Walker, and drown the South in blood. Such predictions were made without knowledge of the profound racism and fear which pervaded the white North, and certainly without awareness of the keen perceptions of black people in the South. For most of the enslaved people knew their oppressors, and certainly realized that such a black uprising would expose the presence of Pharaoh's armies everywhere. To choose that path to freedom would surely unite the white North and South more quickly than any other single development, making black men, women, and children the enemy—the isolated, unprepared enemy. For anyone who needed concrete evidence, Gen. George B. McClellan, the commander of the Union's Army of the Ohio, had supplied it in his "Proclamation to the people of Western Virginia" on May 26, 1861: "Not only will we abstain from all interferences with your slaves, but we will, with an iron hand, crush any attempt at insurrection on their part."

So, heeding their own intuitive political wisdom, the black masses confirmed in their actions certain words which had recently appeared in the Anglo-African. Thomas Hamilton, the editor, had heard of Lincoln's decision to countermand an emancipation order issued by one of his most fervent Republican generals, John C. Fremont, in Missouri. Hamilton predicted: "The forlorn hope of insurrection among the slaves may as well be abandoned. They are too well informed and too wise to court destruction at the hands of the combined Northern and Southern armies—for the man who had reduced back to slavery the slaves of rebels in Missouri would order the army of the United States to put down a slave insurrection in Virginia or Georgia." He was right, of course, and the enslaved population was also right. Therefore, instead of mass insurrection, the Civil War created the context for a vast broadening and intensifying of the self-liberating black movement which had developed prior to the war. Central to this black freedom action, as always, was the continuing series of breaks with the system of slavery, the denials of the system's power, the self-emancipation of steadily increasing thousands of fugitives. Thus, wherever possible, black people avoided
the deadly prospects of massive, sustained confrontation, for their ultimate objective was freedom, not martyrdom.

As the guns resounded across the Southern lands, the movement of black folk out of slavery began to build. Quickly it approached and surpassed every level of force previously known. Eventually the flood of fugitives amazed all observers and dismayed not a few, as it sent waves of men, women, and children rushing into the camps of the Northern armies. In this overwhelming human movement, black people of the South offered their own responses to the war, to its conundrums and mysteries. Their action testified to their belief that deliverance was indeed coming through the war, but for thousands of them it was not a deliverance to be bestowed by others. Rather it was to be independently seized and transformed through all the courage, wisdom, and strength of their waiting black lives.

This rapidly increasing movement of black runaways had been noted as soon as the reality of Southern secession had been dearly established. Shortly after the guns of April began to sound in Charleston harbor, large companies of fugitives broke loose from Virginia and the Carolinas and moved toward Richmond. Again, one day in Virginia in the spring of 1861, a black fugitive appeared at the Union-held Fortress Monroe. Two days later eight more arrived, the next day more than fifty, soon hundreds. The word spread throughout the area: there was a "freedom fort," as the fugitives called it, and within a short time thousands were flooding toward it. Similarly, in Louisiana two families waded six miles across a swamp, "spending two days and nights in mud and water to their waists, their children clinging to their backs, and with nothing to eat." In Georgia, a woman with her twenty-two children and grandchildren floated down the river on "a dilapidated flatboat" until she made contact with the Union armies. In South Carolina, black folk floated to freedom on "basket boats made out of reeds," thus reviving an ancient African craft. A contemporary source said of the black surge toward freedom in those first two years of the war: "Many thousands of blacks of all ages, ragged, with no possessions, except the bundles which they carried, had assembled at Norfolk, Hampton, Alexandria and Washington. Others …in multitudes…flocked north from Tennessee, Kentucky, Arkansas, and Missouri."

This was black struggle in the South as the guns roared, coming out of loyal and disloyal states, creating their own liberty. This was the black movement toward a new history, a new life, a new beginning. W.E.B. DuBois later said, “The whole move was not dramatic or hysterical, rather it was like the great unbroken swell of the ocean before it dashes on the reefs.” Yet there was great drama as that flowing movement of courageous black men and women and children sensed the movement of history, heard the voice of God, created and signed their own emancipation proclamations, and seized the time. Their God was moving and they moved with him.

And wherever this moving army of self-free men and women and children went, wherever they stopped to wait and rest and eat and work, and watch the movement of the armies in the fields and forests--in all these unlikely sanctuaries, they sent up their poetry of freedom. Some of them were old songs, taking on new meaning:

Thus said the Lord, Bold Moses said
Let my people go
If not I'll smite your first-born dead
Let my people go.
No more shall they in bondage toil
Let my people go.
But now there was no need to hide behind the stories of thousands of years gone by, now it was dearly a song of black struggle, of deliverance for their own time of need. Now the singers themselves understood more fully what they meant when they sang again:

One of dese mornings, five o'clock
Dis ole world gonna reel and rock,
Pharaoh's Army got drownded
Oh, Mary, don't you weep.

They were part of the drowning river. Out there, overlooking the battlefields of the South, they were the witnesses to the terrible truth of their own sons, to the this-worldliness of their prayers and aspirations. Remembering that morning in Charleston harbor, who could say they were wrong? "Dis ole world gonna reel and rock..."

Every day they came into the Northern lines, in every condition, in every season of the year, in every state of health. Children came wandering, set in the right direction by falling, dying parents who finally knew why they had lived until then. Women came, stumbling and screaming, their wombs bursting with the promise of new and free black life. Old folks who had lost all track of their age, who knew only that they had once heard of a war against "the Red- coats," also came, some blind, some deaf, yet no less eager to taste a bit of that long-anticipated freedom of their dreams. No more auction block, no more driver's lash, many thousands gone.

This was the river of black struggle in the South, waiting for no one to declare freedom for them, hearing only the declarations of God in the sound of the guns, and moving.

By land, by river, creating their own pilgrim armies and their own modes of travel, they moved south as well as north, heading down to the captured areas of the coast of South Carolina. Frederick Douglass’s Monthly of February 1862 quoted the report of a New York Times correspondent in Port Royal: “Everywhere I find the same state of things existing; everywhere the blacks hurry in droves to our lines; they crowd in small boats around our ships; they swarm upon our decks; they hurry to our officers from the cotton houses of their masters, in an hour or two after our guns are fired. ...I mean each statement I make to be taken literally; it is not garnished for rhetorical effect.” As usual, black people were prepared to take advantage of every disruption in the life of the oppressing white community. When they heard the guns, they were ready, grasping freedom with their own hands, walking to it, swimming to it, sailing to it- determined that it should be theirs. By all these ways, defying masters, patrols, Confederate soldiers, slowly, surely, they pressed themselves into the central reality of the war.

By the end of the spring of 1862, tens of thousands [of self-liberated fugitives] were camped out in whatever areas the Northern armies had occupied, thereby making themselves an unavoidable military and political issue. In Washington, D.C., the commander-in-chief of the Union armies had developed no serious plans for the channeling of the black river. Consequently, in the confusion which all war engenders, his generals in the field made and carried out their own plans. They were badly strapped for manpower, and the black fugitives provided some answers to whatever prayers generals pray. The blacks could relieve white fighting men from garrison duties. They could serve as spies, scouts, and couriers in the countryside they knew so well. They could work the familiar land, growing crops for the food and profit of the Union armies. But as the war dragged on and Northern whites lost some of their early enthusiasm, many Union commanders saw the black men
among them primarily as potential soldiers. Many of the black men were eager to fight, but Lincoln was still not prepared to go that far.

Nevertheless, some Union commanders like Gen. David Hunter in South Carolina were again issuing their own emancipation proclamations and beginning to recruit black soldiers. In places like occupied New Orleans it was the unmanageable and threatening movement of the blacks themselves which placed additional pressures on the Union's leader. Reports were pouring into Washington which told not only of the flood of fugitives, but of black unrest everywhere. Black men were literally fighting their way past the local police forces to get themselves and their families into the Union encampments. There was word of agricultural workers killing or otherwise getting rid of their overseers, and taking over entire plantations. Commanders like Gen. Ben Butler warned that only Union bayonets prevented widespread black insurrection. (In August 1862, to preserve order and satisfy his need for manpower, Butler himself had begun to recruit black troops in New Orleans, beginning with the well-known Louisiana Native Guards.) The dark presence at the center of the national conflict could no longer be denied. Lincoln's armies were in the midst of a surging movement of black people who were in effect freeing themselves from slavery. His generals were at once desperate for the military resources represented by the so-called contrabands, and convinced that only through military discipline could this volatile, potentially revolutionary black element be contained. As a result, before 1862 was over, black troops were being enlisted to fight for their own freedom in both South Carolina and Louisiana.

In Washington, Congress was discussing its own plans for emancipation, primarily as a weapon against the South, hoping to deprive the Confederacy of a major source of human power and transfer it into Union hands. Their debates and imminent action represented another critical focus of pressure on the President. While Lincoln continued to hesitate about the legal, constitutional, moral, and military aspects of the matter, he was also being constantly attacked in the North for his conduct of the war. The whites were weary and wanted far better news from the fronts. The blacks were angry about his continued refusal to speak dearly to the issue of their people's freedom and the black right to military service. In the summer of 1862 Frederick Douglass declared in his newspaper: "Abraham Lincoln is no more fit for the place he holds than was James Buchanan. ...The country is destined to become sick of both [Gen. George B.] McClellan and Lincoln, and the sooner the better. The one plays lawyer for the benefit of the rebels, and the other handles the army for the benefit of the traitors. We should not be surprised if both should be hurled from their places before this rebellion is ended. ...The signs of the times indicate that the people will have to take this war into their own hands." But Frederick Douglass was not one to dwell on such revolutionary options. (Besides, had he considered what would happen to the black cause, if the white "people" really did take the war into their own hands?) Fortunately, by the time Douglass's words were published, he had seen new and far more hopeful signs of the times.

In September 1862 Abraham Lincoln, in a double-minded attempt both to bargain with and weaken the South while replying to the pressures of the North, finally made public his proposed Emancipation Proclamation. Under its ambiguous terms, the states in rebellion would be given until the close of the year to end their rebellious action. If any did so, their captive black people would not be affected; otherwise, the Emancipation Proclamation would go into effect on January 1, 1863, theoretically freeing all the enslaved population of the Confederate states and promising federal power to maintain that freedom.

What actually was involved was quite another matter. Of great import was the fact that
the proclamation excluded from its provisions the "loyal" slave states of Missouri, Kentucky, Delaware, and Maryland, the anti-Confederate West Virginia Territory, and loyal areas in certain other Confederate states. Legally, then, nearly one million black people whose masters were "loyal" to the Union had no part of the emancipation offered. In effect, Lincoln was announcing freedom to the captives over whom he had least control, while allowing those in states clearly under the rule of his government to remain in slavery. However, on another more legalistic level, Lincoln was justifying his armies' use of the Confederates' black "property," and preparing the way for an even more extensive use of black power by the military forces of the Union. Here, the logic of his move was clear, providing an executive confirmation and extension of Congress's Second Confiscation Act of 1862: once the Emancipation Proclamation went into effect, the tens of thousands of black people who were creating their own freedom, and making themselves available as workers in the Union camps, could be used by the North without legal qualms. Technically, they would no longer be private property, no longer cause problems for a President concerned about property rights.

It was indeed a strange vessel that the Lord had chosen, but black folk in the South were not waiting on such legal niceties. Not long after the preliminary proclamation, an insurrectionary plot was uncovered among a group of blacks in Culpepper County, Virginia. Some were slaves and some free, and the message of their action carried a special resonance for South and North alike, and perhaps for the President himself. For a copy of Lincoln's preliminary proclamation was reportedly found among the possessions of one of the conspirators. Though at least seventeen of the group were executed, their death could not expunge the fact that they had attempted to seize the time, to wrest their emancipation out of the hands of an uncertain President. On Nat's old "gaining ground" they had perhaps heard the voice of his God and, forming their own small army, were once again searching for Jerusalem.

Such action symbolized a major difference in the movement of the Southern and Northern branches of the struggle. In the South, though most of the self-liberating black people eventually entered the camps, or came otherwise under the aegis of the Northern armies, they were undoubtedly acting on significant, independent initiatives. During the first years of the war, the mainstream of the struggle in the South continued to bear this independent, self-authenticating character, refusing to wait for an official emancipation.

In such settings black hope blossomed, fed by its own activity. Even in the ambiguous context of the contraband communities the signs were there. In 1862-63, in Corinth, Mississippi, newly free blacks in one of the best of the contraband camps organized themselves under federal oversight, and created the beginnings of an impressive, cohesive community of work, education, family life, and worship. They built their own modest homes, planted and grew their crops (creating thousands of dollars of profit for the Union), supported their own schools, and eventually developed their own military company to fight with the Union armies. It was not surprising, then, that black fugitives flocked there from as far away as Georgia. Nor was it unexpected that, in 1863, federal military plans demanded the dismantling of the model facility. Nevertheless, the self-reliant black thrust toward the future had been initiated, and Corinth was only one among many hopeful contraband communities.

Such movement, and the vision which impelled it, were integral aspects of the freedom struggle in the South. Meanwhile, to aid that struggle, by 1863 Harriet Tubman had entered the South Carolina war zone. Working on behalf of the Union forces, she organized a corps
of black contrabands and traveled with them through the countryside to collect information for army raids, and to urge the still-enslaved blacks to leave their masters. Apparently the intrepid leader and her scouts were successful at both tasks, though Tubman complained that her long dresses sometimes impeded her radical activities.

In the North the situation was somewhat different. Word of Lincoln's anticipated proclamation had an electrifying effect on the black community there, but at the same time further removed the focus from the black freedom-seizing movement in the South. The promised proclamation now gave the Northerners more reason than ever to look to others for release, to invest their hope in the Union cause. Now it seemed as if they would not need to be isolated opponents of an antagonistic federal government. Again, because they wanted to believe, needed to hope, yearned to prove themselves worthy, they thought they saw ever more clearly the glory of the coming; before long, in their eyes the proclamation was clothed in what appeared to be almost angelic light. As such, it became an essentially religious rallying point for the development of a new, confusing mainstream struggle: one which, nervous and excited, approached and embraced the central government and the Republican party as agents of its deliverance. Doubts from the past were now cast aside, for their struggle was unquestionably in the hands of Providence and the Grand Army of the Republic. The voice of God was joined to that of Abraham Lincoln.

From a certain legal point of view it could be argued that the Emancipation Proclamation set free no enslaved black people at all. Since by December 31, 1862, no Confederate state had accepted Lincoln's invitation to return to the fold with their slaves unthreatened, and since Lincoln acknowledged that he had no real way of enforcing such a proclamation within the rebellious states, the proclamation's power to set anyone free was dubious at best. (Rather, it confirmed and gave ambiguous legal standing to the freedom which black people had already claimed through their own surging, living proclamations.) Indeed, in his annual address to Congress on December 1, 1862, Lincoln had not seemed primarily concerned with the proclamation. Instead, he had taken that crucial opportunity to propose three constitutional amendments which reaffirmed his long-standing approach to national slavery. The proposed amendments included provisions for gradual emancipation (with a deadline as late as 1900), financial compensation to the owners, and colonization for the freed people. In other words, given the opportunity to place his impending proclamation of limited, immediate emancipation into the firmer context of a constitutional amendment demanding freedom for all enslaved blacks, Lincoln chose another path, one far more in keeping with his own history.

But none of this could dampen the joy of the black North. Within that community, it was the Emancipation Proclamation of January 1, 1863, which especially symbolized all that the people so deeply longed to experience, and its formal announcement sent a storm of long-pent-up emotion surging through the churches and meeting halls. It was almost as if the Northern and Southern struggles had again been joined, this time not through wilderness flights, armed resistance, and civil disobedience, but by a nationwide, centuries-long cord of boundless ecstasy. In spite of its limitations, the proclamation was taken as the greatest sign yet provided by the hand of Providence. The river had burst its boundaries, had shattered slavery's dam. It appeared as if the theodicy of the Northern black experience was finally prevailing. For the freedom struggle, especially in the South, had begun to overwhelm the white man's war, and had forced the President and the nation officially to turn their faces toward the moving black masses. Wherever black people could assemble, by themselves or
with whites, they came together to lift joyful voices of thanksgiving, to sing songs of faith, to proclaim, "Jehovah hath triumphed, his people are free." For them, a new year and a new era had been joined in one.

On the evening of December 31, 1862, Frederick Douglass was in Boston attending one of the hundreds of freedom-watch-night services being held across the North in anticipation of the proclamation. That night, a line of messengers had been set up between the telegraph office and the platform of the Tremont Temple, where the Boston meeting was being held. After waiting more than two hours in agonized hope, the crowd was finally rewarded as word of the official proclamation reached them. Douglass said: "The effect of this announcement was startling beyond description, and the scene was wild and grand. Joy and gladness exhausted all forms of expression, from shouts of praise to sobs and tears. ..a Negro preacher, a man of wonderful vocal power, expressed the heartfelt emotion of the hour, when he led all voice in the anthem, 'Sound the loud timbrel o'er Egypt's dark sea, Jehovah hath triumphed, his people are free.'"

Such rapture was understandable, but like all ecstatic experiences, it carried its own enigmatic penalties. Out of it was born the mythology of Abraham Lincoln as Emancipator, a myth less important in its detail than in its larger meaning and consequences for black struggle. The heart of the matter was this: while the concrete historical realities of the time testified to the costly, daring, courageous activities of hundreds of thousands of black people breaking loose from slavery and setting themselves free, the myth gave the credit for this freedom to a white Republican president. In those same times when black men and women saw visions of a new society of equals, and heard voices pressing them against the American Union of white supremacy, Abraham Lincoln was unable to see beyond the limits of his own race, class, and time, and dreamed of a Haitian island and of Central American colonies to rid the country of the constantly accusing, constantly challenging black presence. Yet in the mythology of blacks and whites alike, it was the independent, radical action of the black movement toward freedom which was diminished, and the coerced, ambiguous role of a white deliverer which gained pre-eminence.

POSTSCRIPT,
Did Abraham Lincoln Free the Slaves?
Abraham Lincoln's reputation as "the Great Emancipator" traditionally has been based upon his decision in 1862 to issue the Emancipation Proclamation. While Harding stresses that Lincoln was forced to act by the large number of slaves who already had engaged in a process of self-liberation, he and other scholars point out the limited impact of Lincoln's emancipation policy. Announced in September 1862, the measure would not go into effect until January 1, 1863, and it would apply only to those slave states still in rebellion against the Union. In other words, emancipation would become law in states where the federal government was in no position to enforce the measure. Also, the status of slaves residing in states that had not seceded (Missouri, Kentucky, Maryland, and Delaware) would not be altered by this fiat. Theoretically, then, the Proclamation would have few benefits for those held in bondage in the Confederacy.

Critics of Lincoln's uncertain approach to ending slavery in particular and to the rights of African-Americans, slave and free, in general also cite a number of other examples that draw Lincoln's commitment to freedom into question. During the presidential campaign of 1860, candidate Lincoln had insisted that he had no desire to abolish slavery where the institution
already existed. There was, of course, the President's statement that he would be willing to keep slavery intact if that was the best means of preserving the Union. His alternative claim that he would be willing to free all the slaves to maintain the sanctity of the Union appeared as just so much rhetoric when compared to his policies as president. For example, Lincoln initially opposed arming black citizens for military service, he countermanded several of his field generals' emancipation orders, and he consistently expressed doubts that blacks and whites would be able to live in the United States as equal citizens. Then, in December 1862, between his announcement of the preliminary emancipation proclamation and the time that the order was to go into effect, the President proposed a constitutional amendment that would provide for gradual emancipation, with compensation to the slave owners followed by colonization of the liberated blacks to a site outside the boundaries of the United States. In assessing Lincoln's racial attitudes and policies, care should be taken not to read this historical record solely from a twenty-first century perspective. Lincoln may not have been the embodiment of the unblemished racial egalitarian that some might hope for, but few whites were, including most of the abolitionists. Still, as historian Benjamin Quarles has written, Lincoln "treated Negroes as they wanted to be treated—as human beings." Unlike most white Americans of his day, Lincoln opposed slavery, developed a policy that held out hope for emancipation, and supported the Thirteenth Amendment.