

**President Abraham Lincoln's real intent behind the Emancipation Proclamation  
was an attempt at a quick end to the war, without the Europeans entering  
to support the Confederacy;  
and never for the purpose of freeing slaves to assimilate into society**

by

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## **President Abraham Lincoln's real intent behind the Emancipation Proclamation**

Pres. Abraham Lincoln's intent behind the Emancipation Proclamation was an attempt at a quick end to the war while attempting to keep the Europeans from acknowledging the Confederacy, and never for the purpose of freeing the slaves to assimilate into society. His intent in announcing the proclamation never had anything to do with freeing the slaves for any humanitarian purpose.

While often referred to as the Great Emancipator, Lincoln had no intention of freeing slaves and allowing them to assimilate into society. His Emancipation Proclamation was a "war measure" designed to gain a military advantage, and not a humanitarian gesture. He needed to give the South a reason to return to their homes and end the war, and he needed to give the Europeans a reason not to acknowledge the Confederacy. *If* his actions resulted in freeing any slaves Lincoln's hope was to colonize them in a foreign country.

He had issued a preliminary Proclamation on September 22, 1862, giving the South 100 days to end the war or suffer the consequences of his final Proclamation to free the slaves. When he said, "free the slaves," he only meant in the areas of rebellion. Quoting from his Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation of September 22<sup>nd</sup>:

That on the first day of January in the year of our Lord, one thousand eight hundred and sixty-three, all persons held as slaves within any state, or designated part of a state, the people whereof *shall then be in rebellion* against the United States shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free.<sup>1</sup> (*emphasis added*)

The Preliminary Proclamation issued in hopes the Southern men would go home and protect their women, children and property.

The Europeans probably would not enter the war behind the Confederates if the issue of slavery were front and center. Even a high school AP history book summed this up succinctly:

Many in England agreed with the proclamation; any last second hopes that England might enter the war to aid the Confederacy were dashed at this point.<sup>2</sup>

We find a little more detail on this point in William Safire's *Freedom*:

The governments of England and France were fixing to recognize the Confederacy – Gladstone, Chancellor of the Exchequer, had said as much recently. That would give Jeff Davis the means and method to buy arms, to break the blockade, to set up in business as a county. But by freeing the South's slaves, Lincoln would embarrass the British government in the eyes of its own people.<sup>3</sup>

Even a young Union soldier saw the potential of the Proclamation. In a letter written home to his brother and sister, Jacob Behm of the 48<sup>th</sup> Illinois Infantry wrote on February 18, 1863:

It is now but too plainly the policy of our government to strike a felle blow at what we know and what the confederats themselves claim to be the chief element of their strength, if we emancipate the Slave call him off from raising supplies in the farm and in the shop we will thus drive the Rebels Home to support and protect his family reduce largely his effective fighting force, very soon bring him to terms of submission.<sup>4</sup>

If the Rebels went home to protect their family, their fighting days would be over and the war would end.

Lincoln could not let the Europeans enter the war backing the Confederacy. "In Europe, kings, princes, money-barons, social aristocrats, were making signs as though to recognize the South as an independent nation."<sup>5</sup> "To prevent their fatal recognition of the Confederacy Lincoln played his trump card, long held in his sleeve – Emancipation. With it he captured the hearts and imaginations of the European masses, who kindled to Republican doctrines."<sup>6</sup>

It is known that Lincoln opposed slavery in general terms, but he admitted on numerous occasions that he wasn't opposed to the Southern states having slavery, just the entry of slavery into the territories. Lincoln continued his stance that freeing the slaves was not his paramount

objective when he wrote to Horace Greeley. In his letter to the editor of the *New York Times*, Lincoln wrote on August 22, 1862, “If there be those who would not save the Union, unless they could at the same time *save* slavery, I do not agree with them. If there be those who would not save the Union unless they could at the same time *destroy slavery*, I do not agree with them. My paramount object of this struggle *is* to save the Union, and is *not* either to save or to destroy slavery.”<sup>7</sup> Lincoln’s only desire was to save the union, and he would do whatever would allow him to succeed whether the slaves benefitted or not.

Timely proof that Lincoln did not want to free the slaves can be found from March 4, 1861 in only the third paragraph of Lincoln’s First Inaugural Address he stated:

It is found in nearly all the published speeches of him who now addresses you. I do but quote from one of those speeches when I declare that “I have no purpose, directly or indirectly, to interfere with the institutions of slavery in the States where it exists. I believe I have no lawful right to do so, and I have not inclination to do so.” Those who nominated and elected me did so with full knowledge that I made this, and many similar declarations, and had never recanted them.<sup>8</sup>

He admitted many times that he had no power to free the slaves and declared this early in one of more important speeches as a president, his inaugural address.

In *The Fiery Trial*, written by renowned historian Eric Foner, a Columbia University professor and award winning author for other historical books, and the past president of the American Historical Association, the Organization of American Historians, and the Society of American Historians, digs into the entire slavery issue in America. Regarding the issue and the Emancipation Proclamation, he writes: “In fact, however, the Emancipation Proclamation was as much a political as a military document.”<sup>9</sup> He also writes of the division of Virginia creating West Virginia. This act violated the U.S. Constitution and Foner writes: “To Lincoln, the key issue was not constitutionality, but whether admission would assist the war effort.”<sup>10</sup> In addition, to show the sentiment of the North he writes: “On one thing border Unionists agreed:

emancipation, gradual or not, must be accompanied by the removal of the black population.”<sup>11</sup>

Foner’s extensive discussion of Lincoln and slavery provides numerous points that show Lincoln was not interested in freeing the slaves into U.S. society, nor was it really the desires of the North.

If any slaves were to be freed Lincoln wanted to ship them to a foreign country, similar to what had been done in the 1820’s when Liberia was established. Long before the issuance of the Proclamation, Lincoln discussed colonization, as this was not an afterthought at the time of his Proclamation, or a last second decision of Lincoln as a means to move the slaves out of the U.S. As Allen Guelzo wrote in *Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation*, the idea had been percolating for years. Guelzo, the winner of the Lincoln Prize in 2000 for another book, states, “Even earlier, Lincoln had had fingers in the wind about possible colonial destinations. In March 1861, he directed the American minister to Guatemala to begin looking up possible colonization sites in Central America.”<sup>12</sup>

In his book *The Real Lincoln*, Thomas J. DiLorenzo recites Lincoln’s message to Congress: “I cannot make it better known than it already is, that I strongly favor colonization,”<sup>13</sup> as well as “He did attempt, however, to colonize all of the freed blacks in Haiti, Africa and elsewhere.”<sup>14</sup> Many references are made in this book to Lincoln’s true plans, which are historical facts taken from writings and speeches, that seem to be missing in many other writings by authors on Lincoln.

An interesting discussion was had by Lincoln, on August 14, 1862 at the White House, with a group of free black men, who were pastors in the District of Columbia, shows how Lincoln clearly wanted to colonize the slaves in a foreign country if his Proclamation resulted in the freeing of slaves. This was pre-Proclamation, as Lincoln wanted to include the colonization

fact in his ultimate Proclamation. He informed the free black men before him that a sum of money had been appropriated by Congress in order to colonize slaves in another country.<sup>15</sup> In that meeting, prior to trying to convince the freed black men to back his colonization plan, Lincoln told them why blacks and whites could not live together. He stated that: “We have between us a broader difference than exists between almost any other two races.”<sup>16</sup> He continued in his lecture to them “not a single man of your race is made the equal of a single man of ours,” and “It is better for us both, therefore, to be separated.”<sup>17</sup> This “discussion” was more like a “lecture” as Lincoln explained his thoughts without any interaction. He had wanted the freemen before him to agree that if the slaves were freed they would be shipped to a Central American country. Of course, these free black men did not agree and no mention of colonization appears in the ultimate issuance of the Proclamation.

An advantage of writing on someone like Abraham Lincoln is there are many primary sources that can be read today without the influences of other historians’ bias. Taking directly from his September 13, 1862 writing, Lincoln said: “That to proclaim emancipation would secure the sympathy of Europe and the whole civilized world ... No other step would be so potent to prevent the foreign intervention.”<sup>18</sup> He wrote this before he first issued his Proclamation and shows his intent to prevent the Europeans from joining on the side of the Confederacy.

The question of power is often raised anytime the process of the Emancipation Proclamation is discussed by a historian who is trying to get to the truth. This is addressed by Holzer in his *Lincoln and the Power of the Press*, when he writes: “Huddled around their conference table, however, the officials refused to be silenced. Attorney General Bates at once

objected to Lincoln's idea on legal grounds – he doubted the president had the power to confiscate slaves in Confederate territory, even as a war measure.”<sup>19</sup>

Whether Lincoln had the power is an interesting question, but when you look at how he did it we see that he probably did have the power to do so, at least from the standpoint of instructing his Generals. The Proclamation was not an announcement to the world that he was freeing the slaves, but a military directive. Further evidence that the Proclamation was a war measure is found in *The Emancipation Proclamation: Three Views*:

Lincoln issued his proclamation in general orders format, meaning that it was an order from Commander-in-Chief Lincoln to his armed forces. The president had complete control over the army, making it unnecessary to go to Congress to make the proclamation effective; thousands of other orders similar to it were issued, though none so controversial or pivotal to United States history.<sup>20</sup>

Even the decision of when to issue his Proclamation was of concern. Lincoln had wanted to issue his Proclamation after a battle win so it would not look like the North was desperate. When he finally decided to make his Proclamation public, it was a few days after “winning” at Antietam. In *The Emancipation Proclamation*, written by three authors, one a Lincoln Prize winner and one the former president of both the Abraham Lincoln Association and the Lincoln Group of Boston as well as being the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Rhode Island, described the “cost” of this win. “With a Union victory, albeit a costly one with total casualties exceeding 26,000 in one horrifying day, Lincoln felt emboldened enough finally to issue, on September 22, the preliminary version of the Emancipation Proclamation.”<sup>21</sup> Lincoln felt a battle that pushed General Lee back was a victory even with the loss of over 26,000 of his own men. Still sounds desperate.

The day finally came for Lincoln to follow through on his promise from September. It was time to actually sign his Proclamation. At noon on January 1, 1863 William Seward, the Secretary of State, took the final version of the Emancipation Proclamation to President Lincoln. After hesitating, Lincoln said to Seward,

“I have been shaking hands since nine o’clock this morning, and my right arm is almost paralyzed. If my name ever goes into history it will be for this act, and my whole soul is in it. If my hand trembles when I sign the Proclamation, all who examine the document hereafter will say, ‘He hesitated.’”<sup>22</sup>

“He then turned to the table, took up the pen again, and slowly, firmly wrote that ‘Abraham Lincoln’ with which the whole world is now familiar. He looked up, smiled and said: ‘That will do.’”<sup>23</sup> Lincoln felt this was what he would be remembered for, and it has become so, with historians giving him credit for a humanitarian act that was purely a war measure.

There will always be historians that have differing views, but with the mounds of evidence available, it is tough *not* to see how Lincoln’s focus of his Emancipation Proclamation was solely as an aid in his war efforts, with no intentions of freeing slaves. Even in a book designed for schoolchildren, Brandan January admits the proclamation did not abolish slavery.

January wrote:

But the Emancipation Proclamation did not abolish slavery everywhere. The loyal border states did not have to free their slaves. Lincoln also allowed slaveowners who supported the Union to keep their slaves.<sup>24</sup>

Many children’s books today are so one sided, and not usually written by true historians, but this one offers some truths to the freeing of slaves.

The Proclamation ultimately claimed to free the slaves, but only in areas that were under the control of the Confederacy, prompted mockery from some newspapers. “The Proclamation expressly omitted the loyal slave states from its terms; it contained no indictment of slavery, being based on ‘military necessity.’”<sup>25</sup> The London Spectator mocked: “The principle is not that



a human being cannot justly own another, but that he cannot own him unless he is loyal to the United States.”<sup>26</sup> And Lincoln’s own Secretary of State, William Henry Seward, was quoted as saying: “We show sympathy with slavery by emancipating the slaves where we cannot reach them and by holding them in bondage where we can set them free.”<sup>27</sup>

There is an interesting fact that resulted from Lincoln’s presidency regarding the “national” thinking. In an article in *The Atlantic Monthly*, Garry Wills spends considerable time analyzing the words of Abraham Lincoln, especially those in his Gettysburg Address, and makes this observation about the state of the union:

The results of this were seen almost at once. Up to the Civil War “the United States” was invariably a plural noun: “The United States are a free country.” After Gettysburg it became a singular: “The United States is a free country.” This was a result of the whole mode of thinking that Lincoln expressed in his acts as well as his words, making union not a mystical hope but a constitutional reality.<sup>28</sup>

Lincoln in many ways changed the United States. We became more of a unified nation in thinking, and slavery ultimately ended; but while Lincoln is often given the moniker the Great Emancipator his intent was far from becoming the emancipator he is given credit for today. Issuing of a war measure led to a misinterpretation of facts that Lincoln’s intentions were to free the slaves.

With the Emancipation Proclamation Lincoln did succeed in keeping the Europeans from acknowledging the Confederacy, but he failed to end the war in a quick fashion as it brutally continued for two more years. While the slaves were eventually freed, Lincoln failed in this attempt to colonize the freed slaves, his Proclamation was not issued for the purpose of freeing the slaves to assimilate into society.

Many historians today only characterize Lincoln in the most favorable light. They often fail to recognize some of his own words and actions, instead focusing on the ultimate result and giving Lincoln full credit for the eventual outcome.

Had Lincoln's Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation of September 22, 1862 been successful in convincing the Southern men to run home to protect their women, children and property you would not be reading this. Had the Southern men gone home, there would have been no rebellion. With the war over, there would have been no rebellion on January 1, 1863; and, Lincoln would never have issued his final Emancipation Proclamation.

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<sup>1</sup> Don E. Fehrenbacher, trans., *Abraham Lincoln: Speeches and Writings 1859 – 1865, Speeches, Letters, and Miscellaneous Writings - Presidential Messages and Proclamations*. (New York: The Library of America, 1989), 368.

<sup>2</sup> Stephen Armstrong, *5 Steps to a 5, AP U.S History 2012-2013* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2011), 136.

<sup>3</sup> William Safire, *Freedom: A Novel of Abraham Lincoln and the Civil War*, (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1987), 730.

<sup>4</sup> Jacob Behm, "Emancipation – A Soldier's View," *Civil War Times Illustrated* (Feb. 1983): 47.

<sup>5</sup> Lloyd Lewis, *Myths after Lincoln*, (New York: The Press of the Readers Club, 1941) 89.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>7</sup> Angle, Paul M., trans. *Abraham Lincoln: Speeches and Letters*. London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1957. Accessed February 13, 2020, 206. <https://archive.org/details/abrahamlincolnsspee00linc/mode/2up>

<sup>8</sup> Fehrenbacher, *Abraham Lincoln: Speeches and Writings 1859 – 1865*, 215.

<sup>9</sup> Eric Foner, *The Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln and American Slavery* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010), 243.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 239.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 198.

<sup>12</sup> Allen C. Guelzo, *Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation: The end of slavery in America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 141.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas J. DiLorenzo, *The Real Lincoln: A New Look at Abraham Lincoln, His Agenda, and an Unnecessary War* (Roseville, CA: Prima Publishing, 2002) 17.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 275.

<sup>15</sup> *Abraham Lincoln, Remarks on Colonization to African-American Leaders, August 14, 1862*. 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition – House Divided – The Civil War Research Engine at Dickinson College, accessed Feb. 13, 2020, <http://hd.housedivided.dickinson.edu/node/40448>.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Fehrenbacher, *Abraham Lincoln: Speeches and Writings 1859 – 1865*, 364.

<sup>19</sup> Harold Holzer, *Lincoln and the Power of the Press: The War for Public Opinion* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014), 395.

<sup>20</sup> Harold, Holzer, Edna Greene Medford, and Frank J. Williams, *The Emancipation Proclamation: Three Views {Social, Political Iconographic}*, (Baton Rouge, Louisiana University State Press, 2006), 65.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>22</sup> B. A. Botkin, trans., *A Civil War Treasury of Tales, Legends and Folklore* (New York: Promontory Press, 1960), 234.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Brendan January, *The Emancipation Proclamation (Cornerstones of Freedom)* (New York: Children's Press, 1998) 15.

<sup>25</sup> Jay Winik, *April 1865: The Month That Saved America*, (New York: Perennial/HarperCollins, 2002), 248

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Garry Wills, "The Words That Remade America: Lincoln at Gettysburg," *The Atlantic Monthly*, June 1992, 79.

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