

## LOOKING BACK AT OUR CIVIL WAR

## Emancipation changed the war, and the nation

One hundred and fifty years ago tomorrow, President Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation took effect, stating that "all persons held as slaves



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[within rebel-held territory] shall be free ..."

Unable to resolve their differences over slavery, our Founding Fathers avoided mention of the word "slave" in our

constitution. Essayist John J. Chapman called slavery the "sleeping serpent" that lay coiled up under the table at the Constitutional Convention of 1787. It was this serpent that awoke and envenomed our country in the 1850s, leading eventually to the beginning of the Civil War in April 1861.

By July 1862, a number of key events had taken place that pushed President Lincoln toward emancipation. The Army of the Potomac had failed to capture Richmond, the capital of the Confederacy. Second, Congress had passed legislation indicating a tougher war policy. This included the Second Confiscation Act, which punished "traitors" by confiscating their property, including slaves who "shall be deemed captives of war and shall be forever free." Third, both Great Britain and France appeared to be poised to recognize the Confederacy.

Lincoln's own views had evolved, and by mid-July he felt prepared to proceed. "Things had gone from bad to worse, until I felt that we had reached the end of the rope on the plan of operations we had been pursuing, that we ... must change our tactics, or lose the game." The war,



An 1864 illustration shows a Union soldier reading the Emancipation Proclamation to a group of slaves.

he said, could no longer be fought "with elder-stalk squirts, charged with rose water."

On July 22, Lincoln called a Cabinet meeting at which he announced his intention to issue an Emancipation Proclamation. Most approved of the measure, including Secretary of State William Seward; however, Seward recommended postponing it "until you can give it to the country supported by military success." Lincoln accepted the point and waited until after the Battle of Antietam, in mid-September. Though not a decisive victory, Lincoln believed it to be enough of a victory to enable him to make the pronouncement.

Five days later, on Sept. 22, 1862, Lincoln issued the Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation to take effect on Jan. 1. He drew his

authority for it from his war powers as commander in chief to seize enemy resources. Though he had always believed in the immorality of slavery, he did not believe he had the constitutional authority to act against slavery in states and areas loyal to the Union. The Proclamation stated that "all persons held as slaves within any State ... the people whereof shall then be in rebellion against the United States shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free."

In the 100 days between the announcement and its effective date, the Proclamation evoked strong criticism. Democrats denounced it as reckless and unconstitutional. Democrat Clement Vallandigham of Ohio railed against it and called for an immediate armistice and negotiations

with the rebels. He is given credit for the phrase: "The Constitution as it is, the Union as it was, and the niggers where they are." The New York Herald predicted a social revolution. Even abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison was not satisfied, stating that "it leaves slavery ... still to exist in all the so-called loyal slave states."

Despite all the counter-pressures, Lincoln persevered in his promise by signing the Emancipation Proclamation on Jan. 1. As he signed, his hand reacted in tremor, though not from nerves but from the three hours of handshaking at his New Year's Day reception. The final document differed from the preliminary proclamation in three ways. First, the colonization of blacks outside of the United States was not mentioned. Second, it indicated that slaves "will be received into the armed service ... ." Historian James McPherson called the enlisting and arming of blacks to fight the South a "revolution in earnest." Lastly, Lincoln modified his earlier controversial language by adding: "I hereby enjoin [former slaves] ... to abstain from all violence, unless in necessary self-defense ... ."

Coming 244 years after the first African slave arrived in Jamestown, Va., this giant step toward freedom for all blacks was indeed what Ralph Waldo Emerson called "a slow fruit." With the Proclamation, 3.1 million slaves in rebel territory were proclaimed free, the nature of the war was taken to a higher and much nobler plane, and a great stride was taken for social justice.

Throughout the Union states, there was rejoicing and exultation in churches, meeting halls, theaters and newspapers. Frederick Douglass indicated that the date would

be celebrated as the "day which brought liberty and manhood to the American slaves." Lincoln stated: "If my name goes into history it will be for this act, and my whole soul is in it." With the Proclamation Lincoln launched the "new birth of freedom" for our country which he addressed so eloquently in his Gettysburg Address 11 months later.

Though the word "freedom" appears on our buildings, banners and postage stamps, and in the names of our businesses, housing developments and military operations, Americans continue to disagree over the limits and obligations of this ideal. Lincoln always believed that our country should be a beacon of freedom for the entire world; however, today we disagree whether America should inspire freedom principally as an exemplar like Lady Liberty in New York Harbor or as a crusader as in the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. In the wake of the Newtown shootings, we begin our New Year in a debate about whether a mother should be free to instruct her son in and give him access to an assault weapon and whether more guns or fewer will make us freer.

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