

## **EVERYTHING ABOUT THE WAR WAS TO CHANGE**

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Editor's Note: This is part of a biweekly series on Rhode Island's role in the Civil War by former Sun staff writer Sam Simons.

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As Abraham Lincoln stood in the War Department telegraph office on Aug. 30, 1862, he knew he had to make two momentous and disagreeable decisions. The news indicated that the Union army had been defeated at the Second Battle of Bull Run, near Manassas, Va., less than 30 miles from the capital.

Lincoln knew he would have to restore Maj. Gen. George B. McClellan to command of the army and he also knew he would have to postpone issuing the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation.

There was no love lost between Lincoln and McClellan. The headstrong general had brought the Army of the Potomac to within 20 miles of the Confederate capital of Richmond in the spring of 1862. It was a well-conceived but poorly executed campaign and McClellan had been driven back primarily due to his reluctance to attack. McClellan wanted to restore the Union with slavery intact, and many felt his failure to finish the war was because he disagreed with orders to protect the fugitive slaves that were flocking to the Union lines. His failure to fully support Maj. Gen. John Pope and the Army of Virginia as it advanced on Manassas was equally seen as politically motivated. Nevertheless, McClellan had built the Army of the Potomac into an effective fighting force and Lincoln knew he was the only general that could mend it in time to prevent the Confederates from capturing Washington.

McClellan would have been gratified that his machinations had also stopped Lincoln from issuing the executive order that would free all slaves in the Confederate states. Lincoln did not come to office with the intention of abolishing slavery. Though he opposed it on moral grounds, as a lawyer he felt constrained by the Constitution. His views changed as the war progressed.

"(Emancipation) was a very complex issue," according to retired Rhode Island Chief Justice Frank Williams. "There were a lot of things at work, but it became clear that the mission for the war had to change from reunion to reunion and freedom."

Congress, unencumbered by the southern contingent, had passed the Confiscation Acts, which declared that escaped slaves were "contraband of war." The former slaves were not to be returned to their former masters but rather were put to work for the Northern armies. As thousands of blacks fled to the safety of the Union lines, the attitude of Union soldiers also began to change.

"The soldiers were seeing (so many) escaping and their condition. They felt empathy for them," Judge Williams said. "They knew that something had to be done." Yet the consequences of emancipation were potentially devastating. Chief among the concerns was whether the slaveholding states that had remained in the Union, the "Border States" of Kentucky, Missouri and Maryland, would switch

allegiances. Lincoln did all he could to include the leaders of those states in his decision, even offering to compensate slave owners for their "lost property."

Other concerns were raised by his cabinet members: how the army would respond, would it lead to bloodshed by former slaves, would the Confederates be less likely to give up the fight and fight all the harder.

In the end, Lincoln took the decision upon himself. "It was a gamble that he would still have enough votes (to keep the Border States)," Judge Williams said. "Lincoln had the view that as chief magistrate, it was his responsibility. The way he handled it demonstrated real political courage." But before he could deal with emancipation, Lincoln knew that he needed a battlefield victory or the decree would be perceived as a desperate act of a sinking nation.

Ironically, McClellan would supply that victory.

NEXT: 150 years ago, McClellan does just enough at Antietam.

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