

# *The Emancipation Proclamation*

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## The Document that vindicated America

*By Jack Herrick – Lafayette High School*

The Emancipation Proclamation was undoubtedly the single most essential act of Abraham Lincoln's presidency. The text of this immortal document exposes the most important themes of the Civil War by affirming slavery's role in precipitating the war itself, establishing the importance of black soldiers, and also by expressing Lincoln's own personal hopes to reunite the Union.

*“All persons held as slaves within any state or designated part of a state, the people whereof shall be in rebellion against the United States, shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free...”*<sup>1</sup>

In addition to the intense moral implications and impact of the document, the Proclamation aided the Union's cause instrumentally. As a result of its exclusivity to territory still held by the Confederacy, only a small number of slaves were actually immediately freed. However, the importance of the Proclamation could be easily seen by the deprivation of the South's essential labor force by incentivizing all slaves to escape to nearby Union lines. Black slaves, who had been escaping to Union lines ever since the war had been brought to the South, were made free by the Proclamation. The tactical importance of this Emancipation was instrumental in ending the war. Thousands of these slaves immediately enlisted in the Union Army once emancipated. Lincoln declared that *“such persons of suitable condition will be received into the armed service of the United States to garrison forts, positions, stations, and other places, and to man vessels of all sorts in said service.”*<sup>2</sup> This impact caused by the Proclamation made itself apparent almost immediately. Black men could at long last fight for their freedom, and subsequently focused their efforts on enlisting. The Union Army finally accepted them into their ranks, abandoning the

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<sup>1</sup> Roy P. Basler, *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1953) Vol. 2: 323, Vol. 5: 442-443, Vol. 7: 394-396

<sup>2</sup> Ira Berlin, “The Slaves Were the Primary Force Behind Their Emancipation,” in *The Civil War: Opposing Viewpoints*, ed. William Dudley (San Diego: Greenhaven, 1995) 284

idea that the war was only one that “white men” could fight. Lincoln reported in his December 8, 1863 State of the Union Address that close to 100,000 black troops had joined the Union’s Army and Navy.

“*So far as tested, it is difficult to say they are not as good soldiers as any,*” Lincoln reported. He was also quick to allay early fears of the Proclamation’s opponents: “*No servile insurrection or tendency to violence or cruelty has marked the measures of emancipation and arming the blacks.*” As the Union Army advanced through the South, Lincoln again noted the changed condition of the military in his 1864 message to Congress: “*thousands, white and black, join us as the national arms press back the insurgent lines*”. Almost 300,000 African Americans joined the Union Military between 1863 and 1865. By war’s end, they made up ten percent of Union forces and performed key roles in the Union victory.<sup>3</sup>

Lincoln took a magnificent political risk when pursuing the Emancipation Proclamation. In 1860, Lincoln has been elected with considerably less than half of the popular vote. In 1863, as the Emancipation took effect, the Proclamation was finding increasing support among the Northern public and Union soldiers. However, the vast majority of soldiers within the armed forces were not by any means abolitionists. The soldiers, as written by an Indiana Colonel, only wanted “*to destroy everything that in aught gives the rebels strength,*” so “*this army will sustain the emancipation proclamation and enforce it with the bayonet.*” Acceptance of Emancipation was by no means universal among the Northerners. A New York newspaper editor told a mass meeting that “*when the President called upon them to go and carry on a war for the nigger, he would be damned if he believed they would go.*” Some of the worst mob violence in American History happened in July 1863. In draft riots in New York City, as well as other cities, northerners who felt they were being threatened with conscription to fight a war of

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<sup>3</sup> Alvin R. Kantor and Marjorie S. Kantor, *Sanitary Fairs: A Philatelic and Historical Study of Civil War Benevolences* (Chicago: Amos Philatelics, 1992).

emancipation targeted black people with beatings, lynching's and the destruction of property, including the burning of the Colored Orphan Asylum. More than 100 people were killed in the violence.<sup>4</sup>

The backlash brought on by the mere suggestion of emancipation greatly threatened Lincoln's re-election chances in 1864. Henry J. Raymond, chairman of the Republican National Committee, told the President. *"The tide is setting strongly against us... Two special causes are assigned to this great reaction in public sentiment,—the want of military success, and the impression...that we can have peace with Union... [but that you are] fighting not for Union but for the abolition of slavery."*

Despite the public resistance, Lincoln went on to forge the Emancipation Proclamation. He invoked a moral commitment, by stating *"There have been men who have proposed to me to return to slavery the black warriors of Port Hudson and Olustee. I should be damned in time & in eternity for so doing. The world shall know that I will keep my faith to friends & enemies, come what will."*<sup>5</sup>

The question of slavery's role in causing the Civil War has provoked some of the most intense debates in American history. Multitudes of Southerners have argued that the true cause of Civil War was not to defend slavery, but rather States' rights. That argument became invalid, however, with the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850, which demanded the use of Federal Marshalls to return their runaway slaves. This action made slavery one of Federal dictation, rather than a state's rights issue. Southern leaders, namely Confederate Vice President Alexander Stephens, often blatantly admitted the importance of slavery to the majority of Confederate State's grievances with the Union. In March 1861 he called slavery the "cornerstone" of the Confederacy: *"The new [Confederate] constitution has put at rest, forever, all the agitating questions relating to our peculiar institution. African slavery as it exists amongst us is the proper status of the Negro in our form of civilization....Though not incorporated in the [U.S.] constitution [its framers] rested upon the assumption of the equality of races. This was an error....Our*

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<sup>4</sup>James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, *In Hope of Liberty: Culture, Community and Protest Among Northern Free Blacks, 1700-1860* (New York: Oxford UP, 1997) ix.

<sup>5</sup>James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Oxford UP, 1988) 312

*new government is founded upon exactly the opposite idea; its foundations are laid, its corner- stone rests, upon the great truth that the negro is not equal to the white man; that slavery subordination to the superior race is his natural and normal condition. This, our new government, is the first, in the history of the world, based upon this great physical, philosophical, and moral truth.”*<sup>6</sup>

What the Emancipation Proclamation did was affirm that the central conflict that precipitated the Civil War was, in fact, slavery. Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation as soon as the dire needs of war made it possible for him to make such a radical step towards abolition. Despite the knowledge that the Proclamation could cost him re-election, he insisted on re-integration of the Union, and the Emancipation itself, as an essential pre-condition to any peace negotiation. Even though the struggle for civil rights would undoubtedly follow, Abraham Lincoln regarded the Proclamation as “the central act of my administration, and the great event of the nineteenth century.”

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<sup>6</sup> Alexander Stephens, “Cornerstone Speech, March 21, 1861