

Ira Berlin, “Who Freed the Slaves? Emancipation and Its Meaning” (1997)

Abstract

Ira Berlin teaches history at the University of Maryland and has written extensively about the history of slavery in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. His 1999 *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in Mainland North America* won Columbia University’s coveted Bancroft Prize for the “best book in American History.” In this essay, Berlin explores the nature of African American political and military participation during the Civil War as he answers the question, “Who Freed the Slaves?”

Introduction

On January 1, 1863, Abraham Lincoln promulgated his Emancipation Proclamation. A document whose grand title promised so much but whose bland words seemed to deliver so little, the Emancipation Proclamation was an enigma from the first. Contemporaries were unsure whether to condemn it as a failure of idealism or applaud it as a triumph of *realpolitik*, and the American people have remained similarly divided ever since.

Meeting in Washington in December 1992, the American Historical Association convened a panel entitled “Black, White, and Lincoln.” Professor James M. McPherson of Princeton University delivered the lead paper entitled “Who Freed the Slaves?”¹ For historians, the issues involved in McPherson’s question—and, by implication, Lincoln’s proclamation—took on even greater significance because they reflected a larger debate between those who look to the top of the social order for cues in understanding the past and those who look to the bottom.

The question of who freed the slaves thus not only addressed the specific issue of responsibility for emancipation in the American South; it also encompassed contemporary controversies over “Great Men” in the history books. While some celebrated history-from-the-bottom-up and condemned elitism, others called for a recognition of the realities of power and belittled a romanticization of the masses.

¹ McPherson had earlier presented his paper in October 1991 at the sixth annual Lincoln Colloquium in Springfield, Illinois. It was published as part of the colloquium’s proceedings. (George L. Painter, ed., *Abraham Lincoln and the Crucible of War: Papers from the Sixth Annual Lincoln Colloquium* [n.p., n.d.], 59-69.) He subsequently published yet other versions in *Reconstruction* 2 (1994): 35-41 and another in the *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 139 (1995): 1-10. He added further commentary on the controversy in an essay-review entitled “Liberating Lincoln,” *New York Review of Books*, Apr. 21, 1994.

The debate over the origins of Civil War emancipation in the American South can be parsed in such a way as to divide historians into two camps: those who understand emancipation primarily as the product of the slaves' struggle to free themselves, and those who see the Great Emancipator's hand at work. James McPherson made precisely such a division. While acknowledging the role of the slaves in their own liberation, he came down heavily on the side of Lincoln's authorship of emancipation, a fact he maintained most ordinary Americans grasped intuitively but one that eluded some scholars whose taste for the complex, the nuanced, and the ironic had blinded them to the obvious. McPherson characterized the critics of Lincoln's preeminence—advocates of what he called the "self-emancipation thesis"—as scholarly populists whose stock in trade was a celebration of the "so-called 'non-elite.'" Such scholars, McPherson implied, denied the historical role of "white males," and perhaps all regularly constituted authority, in a misguided celebration of the masses. McPherson singled out Vincent Harding as the high priest of the self-emancipationists, but there were other culprits, among them Robert F. Engs and myself and my colleagues on the Freedmen and Southern Society Project at the University of Maryland.² Together, these historians were responsible for elevating the "self-emancipation thesis" into what McPherson called "a new orthodoxy."

Lincoln's proclamation of January 1, 1863, as its critics have noted, freed not a single slave who was not already entitled to freedom under legislation passed by Congress the previous year. It applied only to the slaves in territories then beyond the reach of Federal authority. It specifically exempted Tennessee and Union-occupied portions of Louisiana and Virginia, and it left slavery in the loyal border states—Delaware, Maryland, Kentucky, and Missouri—untouched. Indeed, in a strict sense, the Proclamation went no further than the Second Confiscation Act of July 1862, which freed all slaves who fell under Federal control as Union troops occupied Confederate territory. Moreover, at its fullest, the Emancipation Proclamation rested upon the President's wartime power as commander in chief and was subject to constitutional challenge. Lincoln recognized the limitations of his ill-defined wartime authority, and, as his commitment to emancipation grew

² Vincent Harding, *There is a River: The Black Struggle for Freedom in America* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1981). Besides myself, the editors of the four volumes in print are Barbara Jeanne Fields, Thavolia Glymph, Steven Miller, Joseph P. Reidy, Leslie S. Rowland, and Julie Saville. The project's main work has been published by Cambridge University Press under the title *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation*. Thus far four volumes are in print: *The Destruction of Slavery (1985)*; *The Wartime Genesis of Free Labor: The Upper South (1993)*; *The Wartime Genesis of Free Labor: The Lower South (1991)*; and *The Black Military Experience (1982)*. In 1992, The New Press published an abridgment of the first four volumes entitled *Free at Last: A Documentary History of Slavery, Freedom, and the Civil War*, and Cambridge has issued a volume entitled *Slaves No More*.

firmer in 1863 and 1864, he pressed for passage of a constitutional amendment to affirm slavery's destruction.

What then was the point of the Proclamation? It spoke in muffled tones that heralded not the dawn of universal liberty but the compromised and piecemeal arrival of an undefined freedom. Indeed, the Proclamation's flat prose, ridiculed by the late Richard Hofstadter as having "all the moral grandeur of a bill of lading," suggests that the true authorship of African American freedom lies elsewhere—not at the top of American society but at its base.³

Slaves' Role in Emancipation

From the first guns at Fort Sumter, the strongest advocates of emancipation were the slaves themselves. Lacking political standing or a public voice, forbidden access to the weapons of war, slaves nevertheless tossed aside the grand pronouncements of Lincoln and other Union leaders that the sectional conflict was only a war for national unity. Instead, they moved directly to put their own freedom—and that of their posterity—atop the national agenda. Steadily, as opportunities arose, slaves risked their all for freedom. By abandoning their owners, coming uninvited into Union lines, and offering their lives and labor in the Federal cause, slaves forced Federal soldiers at the lowest level to recognize their importance to the Union's success. That understanding traveled quickly up the chain of command. In time, it became evident to even the most obtuse Federal commanders that every slave who crossed into Union lines was a double gain: one subtracted from the Confederacy and one added to the Union. The slaves' resolute determination to secure their liberty converted many white Northern Americans—soldiers and civilians alike—to the view that the security of the Union depended upon the destruction of slavery. Eventually, this belief tipped the balance in favor of freedom, even among Yankees who displayed little interest in the question of slavery and no affection for black people.

Some slaves did not even wait for the war to begin. In March 1861, before the first shots at Fort Sumter, eight runaways presented themselves at Fort Pickens, a federal installation in Florida, "entertaining the idea"—in the words of the fort's commander—that Federal forces "were placed here to protect them and grant them their freedom." The commander believed otherwise and delivered the slaves to the local sheriff, who returned them to their owner.⁴ Although their mission failed, these eight runaways were only the first to evince publicly a conviction that eventually became widespread throughout the slave community.

³ Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It* (New York: Vintage, 1948), 132.

⁴ U.S. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 128 vols. (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1880-1901), ser. 2, vol. 1, 750 (hereafter cited as *OR*).

In making the connection between the war and freedom, slaves also understood that a Union victory was imperative. They did what they could to secure it, throwing their full weight behind the Federal cause, volunteering their services as teamsters, stable hands, and boatmen; butchers, bakers, and cooks; nurses, orderlies, and laundresses; blacksmiths, coopers, and carpenters; and, by the tens of thousands, as common laborers. Slaves "tabooed" those few in their ranks who shunned the effort.⁵ Hundreds of thousands of black men and women would work for the Union army, and more than 135,000 slave men became Union soldiers. Even deep within the Confederacy, where escape to Federal lines was impossible, slaves did what they could to undermine the Confederacy and strengthen the Union—from aiding escaped Northern prisoners of war to praying for Northern military success. With their loyalty, their labor, and their lives, slaves provided crucial muscle and blood in support of the Federal war effort. No one was more responsible for smashing the shackles of slavery than the slaves.

Still, slaves could not free themselves. Slaves could—and they did—put the issue of freedom on the wartime agenda; they could—and they did—make certain that the question of their liberation did not disappear in the complex welter of the war; they could—and they did—ensure that there was no retreat from the commitment to emancipation once the issue was drawn. In short, they did what was in their power to do with the weapons they had. They could not vote, pass laws, issue field orders, or promulgate great proclamations. That was the realm of citizens, legislators, military officers, and the president. However, the actions of the slaves made it possible and necessary for citizens, legislators, military officers, and the president to act. Slaves were the prime movers in the emancipation drama, not the sole movers. Slaves set others in motion, including many who would never have moved if left to their own devices. How they did so is nothing less than the story of emancipation.⁶

Among the slaves' first students were Union soldiers of the lowest rank. Union soldiers soon found their camps inundated with slaves, often breathless, tattered, and bearing marks of abuse who were seeking sanctuary and offering to assist them in any way possible. In so doing, slaves took a considerable risk. They not only faced sure punishment if captured, but Union soldiers often turned upon them violently. Still, some gained entry into Federal lines, where they found work aplenty. Sometimes the slaves' labor cut to the heart of the soldiers' military mission, as slaves understood that the enemy of their enemy was their friend and were pleased to impart information about Confederate troop movements, assist in the construction of Federal fortifications, and guide Union troops through a strange countryside.

⁵ See, for example, Former Superintendent of the Poor in the Department of North Carolina to the Chairman of the American Freedmen's Inquiry Commission, May 25, 1863, in *The Wartime Genesis of Free Labor: The Upper South*, doc. 7.

⁶ The argument is fully explicated in *The Destruction of Slavery*.

Northern soldiers did not have to be Free-Soilers, abolitionists, or even radical egalitarians to appreciate these valuable services. Thus, soldiers were dismayed to discover that they had violated orders by harboring the fugitives. They were more upset when the men and women who cleaned their camps and cooked their food were dragged off to certain punishment by angry masters or mistresses. Indeed, even those soldiers who stoutly maintained that they fought only for Union bitterly resented being implicated in the punishment of men and women who had done nothing more than do them a good turn in exchange for a blanket and a few morsels of food. "I don't care a damn for the darkies," declared one midwestern volunteer in March 1862, "but I couldn't help to send a run away nigger back. I'm blamed if I could."⁷ The "blame" many Union soldiers felt at being implicated in slavery was compounded by their outrage when they discovered that the very same men and women they had returned to bondage were being mobilized by the Confederate enemy against them.

These same lessons were also learned by Federal officers. Slaveholders, many of them brandishing Unionist credentials, demanded that Northern troops return fugitives who had taken refuge within their encampments. They objected particularly to being compelled to do the slave master's dirty work, and they intensely disliked being demeaned before their men. The high-handed demands of slave owners turned many Federal officers into the slaves' champion. When Federal policy toward fugitive slaves finally changed in the summer of 1862, one could hear an almost-audible sigh of relief from the Union officer corps. "This thing of guarding rebels property has about 'played out'.... We have guarded their homes and property long enough.... The only way to put down this rebellion is to hurt the instigators and abettors of it. Slavery must be cleaned out."⁸

Time and time again, slaves forced Federal soldiers and officers to make the choice, a choice that became easier as the Union army's need for labor grew. Change did not come at once, but it came. The lessons slaves taught soldiers and soldiers taught officers slowly ascended the Union chain of command and in November 1861 reached Lincoln's cabinet for the first time.⁹ The slaves' lesson, moreover, did not travel merely within the military chain of command. As news of the war filtered northward, it moved outside of military lines entirely. In their letters home, citizen-soldiers not only informed the Northern public; they formed Northern opinion. Thus, the lesson slaves had taught soldiers reverberated in

⁷ Charles Wills to his family, April 16, 1862, Wills to his brother, February 25, 1862, quoted in James M. McPherson, *What They Fought For, 1861-1865* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1994), 59.

⁸ William P. Lyon to his wife, July 9, 1862, quoted in James M. McPherson, *What They Fought For, 1861-1865* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1994), 60.

⁹ Edward McPherson, *The Political History of the United States of America during the Great Rebellion, 1860-1865*, 2d ed. (Washington, D.C.: Philip & Solomons, 1865), 249, 416.

general-store gossip, newspaper editorials, and sermons throughout the North. It seemed particularly compelling to wives who wanted their husbands home and to parents who were fearful for their sons. It appealed to Northerners who were tired of the war and fearful of the Federal government's seemingly insatiable appetite for young men.¹⁰

Lincoln and Emancipation

The lesson that slaves taught common soldiers, that common soldiers taught officers, that officers taught field commanders, that field commanders taught their desk-bound superiors in Washington, and that resonated in the North was not wasted on Abraham Lincoln. In many ways, Lincoln was a slow learner, but he learned.

Lincoln was no friend of slavery. He believed, as he said many times, that "if slavery is not wrong, nothing is wrong." But, as president, Lincoln also believed he had a constitutional obligation not to interfere with slavery where it existed. Shortly before his inauguration, he offered to support a proposed constitutional amendment that would have prohibited any subsequent amendment authorizing Congress "to abolish or interfere ... with the domestic institutions" of any state, including slavery.¹¹ As wartime leader, he feared the disaffection of the loyal slave states, which he understood to be critical to the success of the Union. He crafted much of his wartime policy respecting slavery to avoid alienating loyal slaveholders, especially in Kentucky, Missouri, and Maryland.¹² Throughout the war, Lincoln [also] held tight to the notion that slaveholders retained a residual loyalty to the Union and could be weaned away from the Confederacy.¹³

Lincoln also doubted whether white and black could live as equals in American society and thought it best for black people to remove themselves physically from the United States.¹⁴ At his insistence, the congressional legislation providing for

¹⁰ *Black Military Experience*, 85-86.

¹¹ For the proposed amendment, see McPherson, *Political History of the United States*, 59; Abraham Lincoln, *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Roy P. Basler, 9 vols. (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1953-55), 4:421-41.

¹² Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 4:531-33, quotation on p. 532.

¹³ Louis S. Gerteis, *From Contraband to Freedman: Federal Policy toward Southern Blacks, 1861-1865* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1973), chap. 4; C. Peter Ripley, *Slaves and Freedmen in Civil War Louisiana* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1976); and especially Peyton McCrary, *Abraham Lincoln and Reconstruction: The Louisiana Experiment* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1978).

¹⁴ On the matter of Lincoln's lifelong connection to the idea of colonization and his principled commitment to the idea and his strategic use of it, see Michael Vorenberg, "Abraham Lincoln and the Politics of Black Colonization," *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association* 14 (1993): 23-45; Jason H. Silverman, "In Isles

the emancipation of slaves in the District of Columbia in April 1862 included a \$100,000 appropriation to aid the removal of liberated slaves who wished to leave the United States. Through the end of 1862, Lincoln continually connected emancipation in the border states to the idea of colonizing slaves somewhere beyond the boundaries of the United States. Lincoln clung to the policy of expatriating black people long after most had abandoned it as a reasonable strategy to gain acceptance for emancipation or as a practical policy to address the consequences of emancipation.¹⁵

Where others led on emancipation, Lincoln followed. Lincoln responded slowly to demands for emancipation as they rose through the military chain of command and as they echoed on the Northern home front. Even as pressure for emancipation grew in the spring of 1862, Lincoln continued to urge gradual, compensated emancipation. The compensation would be to slaveholders for property lost, not to slaves for labor stolen. In late September 1862, even while announcing that he would proclaim emancipation on January 1 if the rebellious states did not return to the Union, he again called for gradual, compensated emancipation in the border states and compensation for loyal slaveholders elsewhere. The preliminary emancipation proclamation also reiterated his support for colonizing freed slaves "upon this continent or elsewhere."¹⁶ While some pressed for the enlistment of black soldiers, Lincoln doubted the capacity of black men for military service, fearing that former slaves would simply turn their guns over to their old masters.

As black laborers became essential to the Union war effort and as demands to enlist black men in the Federal army mounted, the pressure for emancipation became inexorable. By the summer of 1862, Lincoln understood the importance of the sable arm as well as any. Lincoln had decided to act. On July 22, [1862,] he informed the cabinet of his intention to issue a proclamation of general emancipation. The slaves' determination had indeed made every policy short of emancipation untenable.¹⁷ On January 1, 1863, Lincoln fulfilled his promise to free all slaves in the states still in rebellion. Had another Republican been in Lincoln's place, that person doubtless would have done the same. Without question, some would have acted more expeditiously and with greater bravado. Without question, some would have acted more cautiously and with lesser resolve. In the end, Lincoln did what needed to be done. Others might be left behind: Lincoln would not. It does no disservice to Lincoln—or to anyone else—to

Beyond the Main': Abraham Lincoln's Philosophy on Black Colonization," *Lincoln Herald* 80 (1978): 115-22.

¹⁵ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 5:29-31, 317-19.

¹⁶ *U.S. Statutes at Large*, 12 (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1863): 1267-68.

¹⁷ As Lincoln later put it, "No human power can subdue this rebellion without using the Emancipation lever as I have done." Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 7:499-502, 506-8, quotation on p. 507.

say that his claim to greatness rests upon his willingness to act when the moment was right.

When Lincoln finally acted, he moved with confidence and determination. He stripped the final Emancipation Proclamation of any reference to compensation for former slaveholders or colonization for former slaves.¹⁸ He added provisions that allowed for the service of black men in the Union army and navy. The Proclamation opened the door to the eventual enlistment of more than 179,000 black men, most of them former slaves.

More than anything else, the enlistment of black men, slave as well as free, transformed the Federal army into an army of liberation. At war's end, the number of black men in Federal uniform was larger than the number of soldiers in Lee's Army of Northern Virginia. Military enlistment became the surest solvent of slavery, extending to places the Emancipation Proclamation did not reach, especially the loyal slave states. Once slave men entered the Union army, they were free and they made it clear that they expected their families to be free as well. Lincoln's actions, however tardy, gave force to all that the slaves had risked. The Emancipation Proclamation transformed the war in ways only the president could. After January 1, 1863, the Union army marched for freedom, and Lincoln was its commander.

Lincoln understood the importance of his role, both politically and morally—just as the slaves had understood theirs. Having determined to free the slaves, Lincoln declared he would not take back the Emancipation Proclamation even when military failure and political reversals threatened that policy. He repudiated his misgivings about the military abilities of black soldiers and became one of their great supporters. Lincoln praised the role of black soldiers in preserving the Union and ending chattel bondage and vowed not to "betray" them. "There have been men who proposed to me to return to slavery the black warriors of Port Hudson & Olustee to ... conciliate the South," Lincoln reflected in August 1864, "I should be damned in time & in eternity for doing so."¹⁹ To secure the freedom that his proclamation had promised, Lincoln pressed for the final liquidation of slavery in the Union's own slave states where diehards obstructed and delayed. To that end and to write freedom into the nation's highest charter, Lincoln promoted passage of the Thirteenth Amendment, although he did not live to see its ratification.

¹⁸ Lincoln, who had declared in his second annual message to Congress, "I cannot make it better known than it already is, that I strongly favor colonization," never made another public appeal for the scheme. Fehrenbacher, "Only His Stepchildren," 308.

¹⁹ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 7:499-502, 506-8, quotation on p. 507.

Conclusion

The Emancipation Proclamation's place in the drama of emancipation is thus secure—as is Lincoln's. To deny it is to ignore the intense struggle by which freedom arrived. It is to ignore the Union soldiers who sheltered slaves, the abolitionists who stumped for emancipation, and the thousands of men and women who, like Lincoln, changed their minds as slaves made the case for universal liberty. Reducing the Emancipation Proclamation to a nullity and Lincoln to a cipher denies human agency just as personifying emancipation in a larger-than-life Great Emancipator denies the agency of the slaves and many others, and trivializes the process by which the slaves were freed. And, as in many other cases, process is critical.

Both Lincoln and the slaves played their parts in the drama of emancipation. Denying their complementary roles limits understanding of the complex interaction of human agency and events that resulted in slavery's demise. The editors of *Freedom*, who have sought to make the slaves central to the study of emancipation, have tried to expand the terrain of historical understanding, documenting the *process* by which freedom arrived. They have maintained that the slaves were the prime movers of emancipation; they do not believe they were the only movers, and nowhere do they deny Lincoln's importance to the events that culminated in universal freedom. In fact, rather than single out slaves or exclude Lincoln, the editors argue for the significance of others as well: white Union soldiers—few of them racial egalitarians—who saw firsthand how slavery weakened the Union cause; their families and friends in the North, eager for Federal victory, who learned from these soldiers the strength the Confederate regime drew from bonded labor; the Northern men and women, most of whom had no connection with the abolition movement, who acted upon such news to petition Congress; and the congressmen and senators who eventually moved in favor of freedom. Taken as a whole, however, the new understanding of emancipation does suggest something of the complexity of the process by which freedom arrived and the limitation of seeing slavery's end as the product of any one individual—or element—in the social order.

Emphasizing that emancipation was not the work of one hand underscores the force of contingency, the crooked course by which universal freedom arrived. It captures the ebb and flow of events which, at times, placed Lincoln among the opponents of emancipation and then propelled him to the forefront of freedom's friends. It emphasizes the clash of wills that is the essence of politics, whether it involves enfranchised legislators or voteless slaves. Politics, perforce, necessitates an on-the-ground struggle among different interests, not the unfolding of a single idea or perspective, whether that of an individual or an age. Lincoln, no less than the meanest slave, acted upon changing possibilities as he understood them. To think that Lincoln could have anticipated these changes—or, more strangely still, somehow embodied them—imbues him with a power over the course of events that no human being has ever enjoyed. Lincoln was part of history, not above it. Whatever he believed about slavery in 1861, Lincoln did not see the war as an

instrument of emancipation.²⁰ The slaves did. Lincoln's commitment to emancipation changed with time because it had to. The slaves' commitment to universal freedom never wavered because it could not.

Complexity—contrary to McPherson—is not ambivalence or ambiguity. To tell the whole story, to follow that crooked course, does not diminish the clarity of an argument or mystify it into a maze of "nuance, paradox, or irony." Telling the entire tale is not a form of obfuscation. If done right, it clarifies precisely because it consolidates the mass of competing claims under a single head. Elegance or simplicity of argument is useful only when it encompasses all of the evidence, not when it excludes or narrows it. In the perennial tests in which constituted authority searches for the voice of the people and when the people are testing the measure of their leaders, it is well to recall the relationship of both to securing freedom's greatest victory.²¹ Real change derives both from the actions of the people and from the imprimatur of constituted authority.

Source

Excerpted from Ira Berlin, "Who Freed the Slaves? Emancipation and Its Meaning," in *Union and Emancipation: Essays on Politics and Race in the Civil War Era*, ed. David W. Blight and Brooks D. Simpson (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1997), 105–21.

²⁰ If there is a tendency in one brand of social history to emphasize the agency of the disfranchised, there is a similar tendency in one brand of political history to emphasize the omnipotence and clairvoyance of the great leader. The hero sees farthest, first. While combating the former fallacy, McPherson succumbs to the latter. From the beginning of the war, McPherson maintains, "Lincoln demurred from turning the war for Union into a war for slavery because the war for Union united Northern people while premature emancipation would divide them and lose the war." Lincoln, in other words, understood the Civil War as a struggle for emancipation from the beginning. He waited, however, for the right moment to spring the news on those not quite as farseeing. "With an acute sense of timing," McPherson continues, "Lincoln first proclaimed emancipation only as a *means* to win the war (to gain moderate and conservative support) and ultimately as an *end*—to give America 'a new birth of freedom,' as Lincoln said at Gettysburg."

²¹ *USA Today*, Dec. 30, 1992.