

James McPherson, “Who Freed the Slaves?” (1997)

Abstract

[James McPherson](#), emeritus professor of history at Princeton University, is widely recognized for his writing on the Civil War. His *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* won a Pulitzer Prize in 1989. In this excerpt from *Drawn With the Sword: Reflections on the American Civil War*, McPherson investigates several possible answers to the question of who freed the slaves. With potential candidates ranging from President Lincoln to the slaves themselves, McPherson complicates our understanding of the mechanisms by which emancipation was finally accomplished.

Introduction

If we were to go out on the streets of almost any town in America and ask the question posed by the title of this essay, probably nine out of ten respondents would answer unhesitatingly, “Lincoln.” In recent years, though, this answer has been challenged as another example of elitist history, of focusing only on the actions of great white males and ignoring the actions of the overwhelming majority of the people, who also make history. If we were to ask our question of professional historians, the reply would be quite different. They would speak of ambivalence, ambiguity, nuances, paradox, irony. They would point to Lincoln's gradualism, his slow and apparently reluctant decision for emancipation, his revocation of emancipation orders by Generals John C. Frémont and David Hunter, his exemption of border states and parts of the Confederacy from the Emancipation Proclamation, his statements seemingly endorsing white supremacy. They would say that the whole issue is more complex than it appears—in other words many historians, as is their wont, would not give a straight answer to the question.

But of those who did, a growing number would reply, as did a historian speaking to the Civil War Institute at Gettysburg College in 1991: “THE SLAVES FREED THEMSELVES.” They saw the Civil War as a potential war for abolition well before Lincoln did. By flooding into Union military camps in the South, they forced the issue of emancipation on the Lincoln administration. By creating a situation in which Northern officials would either have to return them to slavery or acknowledge their freedom, these “contrabands,” as they came to be called, “acted resolutely to place their freedom—and that of their posterity—on the wartime agenda.” Union officers, then Congress, and finally Lincoln decided to confiscate this human property belonging to the enemy and put it to work for the Union in the form of servants, teamsters, laborers, and eventually soldiers in Northern armies. Weighed in the scale of war, these 190,000 black soldiers and sailors (and probably a larger number of black army laborers) tipped the balance in favor of Union victory. Even deep in the Confederate interior remote from the fighting fronts, with the departure of masters and overseers to the army, “leaving women and old men in charge, the balance of power gradually shifted in favor of

slaves, undermining slavery on farms and plantations far from the line of battle."¹

During the 1980s this self-emancipation theme achieved the status of orthodoxy among social historians. Two important corollaries of the self-emancipation thesis are the arguments, first, that Lincoln hindered more than he helped the cause, and second, that the image of him as the Great Emancipator is a myth created by whites to deprive blacks of credit for achieving their own freedom. This "reluctant ally of black freedom," wrote Vincent Harding, "played an actively conservative role in a situation which ... needed to be pushed toward its most profound revolutionary implications." Lincoln repeatedly "placed the preservation of the white Union above the death of black slavery"; even as late as August 1862, when he wrote his famous letter to Horace Greeley stating that "if I could save the Union without freeing *any* slave, I would do it," he was "still trapped in his own obsession with saving the white Union at all costs, even the cost of continued black slavery."²

How valid are these statements? The traditional answer to the question "Who Freed the Slaves?" is closer to being the right answer than is the new and currently more fashionable answer.

The Sine Qua Non of Emancipation

One must ask what was the sine qua non of emancipation in the 1860s—the essential condition, the one thing without which it would not have happened. The clear answer is the war. Without the Civil War there would have been no confiscation act, no Emancipation Proclamation, no Thirteenth Amendment (not to mention the Fourteenth and Fifteenth), certainly no self-emancipation, and almost certainly no end of slavery for several more decades at least. Slavery had existed in North America for more than two centuries before 1861, but except for a tiny fraction of slaves who fought in the Revolution, or escaped, or bought their freedom, there had been no self-emancipation during that time. A short and simplified summary is that secession and the refusal of the United States government to recognize the legitimacy of secession brought on the war. In both of these matters Abraham Lincoln moves to center stage. Seven states seceded and formed the Confederacy because he won election to the presidency on an antislavery platform; four more seceded after shooting broke out when he refused to evacuate Fort Sumter; the shooting escalated to full-scale war because he called out the troops to suppress rebellion. The common denominator in all of the steps that opened the door to freedom was the active agency of Abraham Lincoln as antislavery political leader, president-elect, president, and commander in chief.

The statement that Lincoln "placed the preservation of the white Union above the death of black slavery,"³ while true in a narrow sense, is highly misleading when shorn of its context. From 1854, when he returned to politics, until nominated for president in 1860, the dominant, unifying theme of Lincoln's career was opposition to the expansion of slavery as the vital first step toward placing it in

the course of ultimate extinction. A student of Lincoln's oratory has estimated that he gave 175 political speeches during those six years. The "central message" of these speeches showed Lincoln to be a "one-issue" man--the issue being slavery. Over and over again, Lincoln denounced slavery as a "monstrous injustice," "an unqualified evil to the negro, to the white man, to the soil, and to the State."⁴

Southerners read Lincoln's speeches: they knew by heart his words about the house divided and the ultimate extinction of slavery. Lincoln's election in 1860 was a sign that they had lost control of the national government; if they remained in the Union, they feared that ultimate extinction of their way of life would be their destiny. That is why they seceded. It was not merely Lincoln's election but his election as a *principled opponent of slavery on moral grounds* that precipitated secession. Without Lincoln's election, Southern states would not have seceded in 1861, the war would not have come when and as it did, the door of emancipation would not have been opened as it was. Here was an event that qualifies as a *sine qua non*, and it proceeded more from the ideas and agency of Abraham Lincoln than from any other single cause.

But, we must ask, would not the election of *any* Republican in 1860 have provoked secession? Probably not, if the candidate had been Edward Bates—who might conceivably have won the election but had no chance of winning the nomination. Yes, almost certainly, if William H. Seward had been the nominee. Seward's earlier talk of a "higher law" and an "irrepressible conflict" had given him a more radical reputation than Lincoln. But Seward might not have won the election. More to the point, if he had won, seven states would undoubtedly have seceded but Seward would have favored compromises and concessions to keep others from going out and perhaps to lure those seven back in. Most important of all, he would have evacuated Fort Sumter and thereby extinguished the spark that threatened to flame into war. But Lincoln stood firm. When Seward flirted with the notion of supporting the Crittenden Compromise, which would have repudiated the Republican platform by permitting the expansion of slavery, Lincoln stiffened the backbones of Seward and other key Republican leaders.⁵

Lincoln on Slavery

It is quite true that once the war started, Lincoln moved more slowly and apparently more reluctantly toward making it a war for emancipation than black leaders, abolitionists, radical Republicans, and the slaves themselves wanted him to move. He did reassure Southern whites that he had no intention and no constitutional power to interfere with slavery in the states. In September 1861 and May 1862 he revoked orders by Generals Frémont and Hunter freeing the slaves of Confederates in their military districts. In December 1861 he forced Secretary of War Simon Cameron to delete from his annual report a paragraph recommending the freeing and arming of slaves. And though Lincoln signed the confiscation acts of August 1861 and July 1862 that freed some slaves owned by Confederates, this legislation did not come from his initiative. Out in the field it

was the slaves who escaped to Union lines and officers like General Benjamin Butler who accepted them as "contraband of war" that took the initiative.

All of this appears to support the thesis that slaves emancipated themselves and that Lincoln's image as emancipator is a myth. But let us take a closer look. It seems clear today, as it did in 1861, that no matter how many thousands of slaves came into Union lines, the ultimate fate of the millions who did not, as well as the fate of the institution of slavery itself, depended on the outcome of the war. Lincoln's chief concern in 1861 was to maintain a united coalition of War Democrats and border-state Unionists as well as Republicans in support of the war effort. To do this he considered it essential to define the war as being waged solely for Union, which united this coalition, and not a war against slavery, which would fragment it. When General Frémont issued his emancipation edict in Missouri on August 30, 1861, the political and military efforts to prevent Kentucky, Maryland, and Missouri from seceding and to cultivate Unionists in western Virginia and eastern Tennessee were at a crucial stage, balancing on a knife edge. To keep his fragile coalition from falling apart, therefore, Lincoln rescinded Frémont's order.

Within six months of his revocation of Frémont's order, he began moving toward a stronger antislavery position. During the spring and early summer of 1862 he alternately coaxed and prodded border-state Unionists toward recognition of the inevitable escalation of the conflict into a war against slavery and toward acceptance of his plan for compensated emancipation in their states. He warned them that the "friction and abrasion" of a war that had by this time swept every institution into its maelstrom could not leave slavery untouched.

By July 1862, Lincoln turned a decisive corner toward abolition. He made up his mind to issue an emancipation proclamation. Whereas a year earlier, even three months earlier, Lincoln had believed that avoidance of such a drastic step was necessary to maintain that knife-edge balance in the Union coalition, things had now changed. The escalation of the war in scope and fury had mobilized all the resources of both sides, including the slave labor force of the Confederacy. The imminent prospect of Union victory in the spring had been shredded by Robert E. Lee's successful counteroffensives in the Seven Days. The risks of alienating the border states and Northern Democrats, Lincoln now believed, were outweighed by the opportunity to energize the Republican majority and to mobilize part of the slave population for the cause of Union--and freedom.⁶

Two years later, speaking to a visiting delegation of abolitionists, Lincoln explained why he had moved more slowly against slavery than they had urged. Having taken an oath to preserve and defend the Constitution, which protected slavery, "I did not consider that I had a *right* to touch the 'State' institution of 'Slavery' until all other measures for restoring the Union had failed.... The moment came when I felt that slavery must die that the nation might live!... Many of my strongest supporters urged *Emancipation* before I thought it indispensable, and, I may say, before I thought the country ready for it. It is my conviction that, had the proclamation been issued even six months earlier than it

was, public sentiment would not have sustained it."⁷

Lincoln actually could have made a case that the country had not been ready for the Emancipation Proclamation in September 1862, even in January 1863. Democratic gains in the Northern congressional elections of 1862 resulted in part from a voter backlash against the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation. The morale crisis in Union armies and swelling Copperhead strength during the winter of 1863 grew in part from a resentful conviction that Lincoln had unconstitutionally transformed the purpose of the war from restoring the Union to freeing the slaves. Without question, this issue bitterly divided the Northern people and threatened fatally to erode support for the war effort—the very consequence Lincoln had feared in 1861. Not until after the twin military victories at Gettysburg and Vicksburg did this divisiveness diminish and emancipation gain a clear mandate in the off-year elections of 1863.⁸ In the summer of 1864, Northern morale again plummeted and the emancipation issue once more threatened to undermine the war effort. By August, Grant's campaign in Virginia had bogged down in the trenches after enormous casualties. Sherman seemed similarly thwarted before Atlanta and smaller Union armies elsewhere appeared to be accomplishing nothing. War weariness and defeatism corroded the will of Northerners as they contemplated the staggering cost of this conflict in the lives of their young men. Lincoln came under enormous pressure to open peace negotiations to end the slaughter. Even Republicans like Horace Greeley, who had criticized Lincoln two years earlier for slowness to embrace emancipation, now criticized him for refusing to abandon it as a precondition for negotiations. Every political observer, including Lincoln himself, believed in August that the Republicans would lose the [presidential] election [of 1864].⁹

The pressure on Lincoln to back down on emancipation caused him to waver temporarily but not to buckle. Instead, he told weak-kneed Republicans that "no human power can subdue this rebellion without using the Emancipation lever as I have done." More than one hundred thousand black soldiers and sailors were fighting for the Union, said Lincoln. They would not do so if they thought the North intended to "betray them.... If they stake their lives for us they must be prompted by the strongest motive ... the promise of freedom. And the promise being made, must be kept.... There have been men who proposed to me to return to slavery the black warriors" who had fought for the Union. "I should be damned in time & in eternity for so doing. The world shall know that I will keep my faith to friends and enemies, come what will."¹⁰ When Lincoln said this, he fully expected to lose the election [of 1864]. In effect, he was saying that he would rather be right than president. In many ways this was his finest hour.

Slaves did not emancipate themselves; they were liberated by Union armies. Freedom quite literally came from the barrel of a gun. And who was the commander in chief that called these armies into being, appointed their generals, and gave them direction and purpose? There, indubitably, is our *sine qua non*.

Conclusion

The traditional answer to the question "Who Freed the Slaves?" is the right answer. Lincoln did not accomplish this in the manner sometimes symbolically portrayed, breaking the chains of helpless and passive bondsmen with the stroke of a pen by signing the Emancipation Proclamation. But by pronouncing slavery a moral evil that must come to an end and then winning the presidency in 1860, provoking the South to secede, by refusing to compromise on the issue of slavery's expansion or on Fort Sumter, by careful leadership and timing that kept a fragile Unionist coalition together in the first year of war and committed it to emancipation in the second, by refusing to compromise this policy once he had adopted it, and by prosecuting the war to unconditional victory as commander in chief of an army of liberation, Abraham Lincoln freed the slaves.

Source

Excerpted from James M. McPherson, "Who Freed the Slaves?," in *Drawn with the Sword: Reflections on the American Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 192-207.

¹ Robert F. Engs, "The Great American Slave Rebellion," lecture delivered to the Civil War Institute at Gettysburg College, June 27, 1991. p. 3; Ira Berlin, Barbara J. Fields, Thavolia Glymph, Joseph P. Reidy, and Leslie S. Rowland, eds., *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation 1861- 1867*, Ser. I, Vol. 1, *The Destruction of Slavery* (Cambridge, 1985), pp. 2, 10.

² Harding, *There Is a River*, pp. 254, 216, 223.

³ Harding, *There is a River*, pp. 254, 216, 223.

⁴ Waldo W. Braden, *Abraham Lincoln: Public Speaker* (Baton Rouge, 1988), pp. 35-36; Roy P. Basler, ed., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 9 vols. (New Brunswick, N.J., 1953-1955), 11, 255, 111, 92, 315.

⁵ Basler et al., eds., *Collected Works of Lincoln*, IV, 149-51, 154, 183, 155, 172.

⁶ John G. Nicolay and John Hay, *Abraham Lincoln: A History*, 10 vols. (New York, 1890), VI, 158-63.

⁷ Francis B. Carpenter, *Six Months at the White House with Abraham Lincoln* (New York, 1866), pp. 76-77.

⁸ Basler et al., eds., *Collected Works of Lincoln*, VII, 49-50.

⁹ Raymond to Lincoln, Aug. 22, 1864, in Basler, ed., *Collected Works of Lincoln*, VII, 518.

¹⁰ Lincoln to Charles D. Robinson, Aug. 17, 1864; interview of Lincoln with Alexander W. Randall and Joseph T. Mills, Aug. 19, 1864, both in *ibid.*, 500, 506-7.