

The Family Heritage Series

A weekly discussion of Americanist truths and traditions for those "heirs of all the ages" who will have to preserve that most important inheritance of all — freedom. Produced by the Movement To Restore Decency.



Volume II

Lesson Sixty-Seven

The Emancipation Proclamation

LESSON IDEA

To explain why the Emancipation Proclamation was issued and the effect it had; and to demonstrate that it was issued for political, not ideological, reasons.

PREPARATION

Have a map of the world on hand to locate Haiti and Liberia. Read "During The Week" and plan to adapt the project suggested to the particular needs of your family.

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“I HAVE NO PURPOSE, directly or indirectly, to interfere with the institution of slavery in the States where it exists,” said Abraham Lincoln, Republican candidate for the United States Senate in 1858. “I believe I have no lawful right to do so, and I have no inclination to do so.” It was a statement which he made often in the political debates with Stephen Douglas; it was an assurance which he gave the Southern people in his First Inaugural Address as President of the United States in 1861.

Yet, within eighteen months after assuming the highest office in the land, he issued a sweeping proclamation that not only *interfered* with slavery in the states where it existed, but seriously crippled the South militarily and economically. And it is clear this was the intended purpose. Does this turnabout mean Lincoln was a political charlatan? A devious politician who promises one thing as a candidate and does the opposite as an officeholder? No. But it *does* mean that the Emancipation Proclamation is one of the most misunderstood documents of all time.

In those tempestuous months between Lincoln's election and his issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation, a political hurricane had swept the nation. Eleven states had seceded, forming the Confederate States of America; armies had been organized in both the North and the South; ships were built; coastal blockades were established; and battles were being fought. But the North had yet to win a decisive victory.

There was a strong possibility that the European nations, especially England (which depended on cotton imports from the Southern states), would recognize the Confederacy as a separate and independent nation, throwing the full support of her navy and her treasury into the fight — as France had done on behalf of the thirteen American colonies during the War for Independence. The American Minister to Spain, Carl Schurz, had already made a special trip to Washington to warn Lincoln about European interference. The only hope of thwarting it, he advised, was to free the slaves. Such an act would not only give the entire conflict the coloring of a moral crusade for human rights and win the support of European intellectuals, but it would also deprive the South of its labor force. It would mean leaving cotton to rot in the fields, thereby destroying the business partnership between Southern producers and European purchasers. It could also be argued that the same labor force that harvested cotton produced food, clothing, and weapons for the Confederate Army, and that freeing the slaves was a military tactic designed to weaken the war-making power of the seceding states. What do you think of this line of reasoning? [Encourage

family discussion on the moral issues involved.]

According to biographer Ida M. Tarbell: "Lincoln understood clearly how strong a weapon against the South the arming and emancipating of the slaves might be, but he did not want to use it. Throughout his entire political life he had disclaimed any desire to meddle with slavery in the States where the Constitution recognized it. He had undertaken the war not to free men but to preserve the Union. Moreover he feared that the least interference with slavery would drive from him those States lying between the North and South [Kentucky, Missouri, and Maryland] which believed in the institution and yet were for the Union. Already they had given him much substantial aid. He hoped to win them entirely to the North. Emancipation would surely make that hope vain The plan upon which he finally settled was a simple and just, though impracticable one — he would ask Congress to set aside money gradually to buy and free the negroes in those States that could be persuaded to give up the institution of slavery. Having freed the slaves, he proposed that Congress should colonize them in territory bought for the purpose."

On March 6, 1861, Lincoln presented this compensated-emancipation proposal to Congress and waited for the reaction of the three Border States. There was only a respectful silence. But Congress passed several acts on the strength of the President's proposal. The most significant of these freed all slaves in the District of Columbia and appropriated one million dollars to pay the owners for their loss, setting aside \$100,000 to pay the expenses of any Negroes who wished to emigrate to Haiti or Liberia. [*Locate these two countries on a map.*]

ON July 12, Lincoln summoned the representatives of the Border States to the White House and made an earnest, almost passionate, appeal to them to consider his proposition of March 6. "I intend no reproach or complaint," he said, "when I assure you that, in my opinion, if you all had voted for the resolution in the gradual-emancipation message of last March, the war would now be substantially ended. And the plan therein proposed is yet one of the most potent and swift means of ending it. Let the States which are in rebellion see definitely and certainly that in no event will the States you

represent ever join their proposed confederacy, and they cannot much longer maintain the contest. But you cannot divest them of their hope to ultimately have you with them so long as you show a determination to perpetuate the institution [*of slavery*] within your own States."

The majority of the Border States' representatives rejected the President's appeal, and it was then that he began to consider a proclamation freeing all the slaves in the seceding states. After weighing the issue carefully, he called a Cabinet meeting on July 22 to tell his advisers he had "resolved upon this step" and had called them together, not to ask for their opinions but to read the proclamation he had drafted and ask for their suggestions. The target date was to be January 1, 1863. To soften the blow and offer an enticement to the Confederacy, Lincoln proposed giving financial aid to any state which by that time had adopted "gradual abolishment of slavery."

The only serious objection was voiced by Secretary of State William Seward, who felt that the timing of such an announcement was poor, the North being the loser in practically every battle fought up to that date. Any proclamation, he argued, made by a President who was Commander-in-Chief of a retreating army would be meaningless, since the force to back the decree was lacking. Can you see the logic of this argument? [*Encourage discussion. Point out that in any conflict, the weaker force is in no position to make demands on the stronger.*]

"I suggest, sir," said Seward, "that you postpone its issue, until you can give it to the country, supported by military success; instead of issuing it, as would be the case now, upon the greatest disasters of the war!"

Lincoln later explained: "The wisdom of the view of the Secretary of State struck me with very great

FOR SERIOUS STUDENTS

We recommend reading *The Life Of Abraham Lincoln* by Ida M. Tarbell (originally published in 1895) for more of the background of the Emancipation Proclamation and the War Between the States. Of special interest are Lincoln's patient prodding of General McClellan, his military advice and diplomacy, and his unique way of debating an issue with himself.

force The result was that I put the draft of the proclamation aside, as you do your sketch for a picture, waiting for a victory. From time to time I added or changed a line, touching it up here and there, anxiously waiting the progress of events."

THE VICTORY Lincoln wanted was long in coming. Disaster followed disaster; and each setback only increased the danger that the North's war effort would crumble entirely. Public opinion was already divided about the war. Those who held radical anti-slavery sentiments felt the war was going badly because the President was sympathetic to slavery, or because his wife was a Southerner by birth, and his efforts were half-hearted. Those who were fighting to preserve the Union because they believed their Southern brethren had the right to choose for themselves about slavery, but not about secession, criticized Lincoln for incompetence as a commander. Each new retreat on the battlefield brought a demand for more effective strategy from one group, and for immediate emancipation from the other.

Horace Greeley, editor of the *New York Tribune*, was one of the most rabid propagandists for emancipation. On August 20, he printed a viciously unfair editorial entitled "The Prayer of 20,000,000," which charged Lincoln with "ignoring, disregarding, and defying" the laws already enacted against slavery. Lincoln answered in a letter published in the *National Intelligencer* of Washington on August 23, stating his position on slavery and emancipation in the clearest terms:

As to the policy I "seem to be pursuing," as you say, I have not meant to leave any one in doubt.

I would save the Union. I would save it the shortest way under the Constitution. The sooner the national authority can be restored, the nearer the Union will be "the Union as it was." If there be those who would not save the Union unless they could at the same time save slavery, I do not agree with them. If there be those who would not save the Union unless they could at the same time destroy slavery, I do not agree with them. My paramount object in this struggle is to save the Union, and is not

either to save or to destroy slavery. If I could save the Union without freeing any slave, I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing all the slaves, I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone, I would also do that. What I do about slavery and the colored race, I do because I believe it helps to save the Union; and what I forbear, I forbear because I do not believe it would help to save the Union. I shall do less whenever I shall believe what I am doing hurts the cause, and I shall do more whenever I shall believe doing more will help the cause. I shall try to correct errors when shown to be errors, and I shall adopt new views so fast as they shall appear to be true views.

But the "Greeley faction," as it was called, continued to egg on the President, not only through the press but through pulpits. To a delegation of self-righteous clerics who demanded the slaves be freed immediately because it was "God's will," the harassed President dryly replied:

I hope it will not be irreverent for me to say that if it is probable that God would reveal His will to others on a point so connected with my duty, it might be supposed He would reveal it directly to me

That Lincoln felt no bolt of Divine lightning directing him to free all slaves was very evident from the way he wrestled with the problem and often argued against it — even after he had decided to issue the proclamation and had already written it. He feared the effects to both whites and Negroes in the South. "Gradual and not sudden emancipation," he had said, "is better for all." He even doubted whether a proclamation would carry any legal weight and whether it would have the desired effect of sabotaging the Southern war effort. This he pointed out to the group of radical Chicago ministers who had demanded immediate emancipation:

What good would a proclamation of emancipation from me do, especially as we are now situated? I do not want to issue a document that the whole world will see must necessarily be inoperative, like the Pope's bull against the

comet. Would my word free the slaves, when I cannot even enforce the Constitution in the rebel States? Is there a single court, or magistrate, or individual that would be influenced by it there? And what reason is there to think it would have any greater effect upon the slaves than the late law of Congress, which I approved, and which offers protection and freedom to the slaves of rebel masters who come within our lines? Yet I cannot learn that that law has caused a single slave to come over to us. And suppose they could be induced by a proclamation of freedom from me to throw themselves upon us, what should we do with them? How can we feed and care for such a multitude? . . . If we were to arm them, I fear that in a few weeks the arms would be in the hands of the rebels; and, indeed, thus far we have not had arms enough to equip our white troops. I will mention another thing, though it meets only your scorn and contempt. There are fifty thousand bayonets in the Union armies from the border slave States. It would be a serious matter if, in consequence of a proclamation such as you desire, they should go over to the rebels.

EXAMINING EVERY ARGUMENT for and against freeing the slaves seemed to be Lincoln's way of testing his own judgment. And in the end, even though he feared it might be fruitless and dreaded the injury it would do to both the Negroes and the loyal whites of the South, he decided it was a chance he must take — a necessary political and military measure to save the Union. Do you agree? Would you have taken the same action? [*Encourage family discussion.*]

The Northern victory for which Lincoln waited came on September 17, when McClellan routed Lee at Antietam, Maryland. On September 23, the Emancipation Proclamation was printed in the newspapers. It was to become effective on January 1 of the following year and to apply only to those states that had seceded. Public reaction was anything but encouraging to the President. Stocks went down, troop enlistments fell off. In five states — Indiana, Illinois, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and New York — elections went against the Republicans (Lincoln's

party). Many said that the President would not dare, in the face of the unrest of the country, fulfill his promise and issue the proclamation. But when Congress convened on December 1, he submitted it, together with the plan for compensated emancipation which he had worked out, and on January 1, 1863, he signed the document that made it an official decree.

Concluding Thought

The Emancipation Proclamation was a political document, issued by Abraham Lincoln as the wartime Commander-in-Chief of the Northern Army. It was designed to cripple the Confederacy and shorten the war by discouraging European intervention and by disrupting the labor force the South needed to harvest her crops and to feed and supply her army. Issued on the first day of January, 1863, it freed the slaves in states that had seceded, but not in the Border States of Kentucky, Missouri, and Maryland, and not in the loyal sections of seceding states. It was prompted not by Lincoln's convictions about slavery but by his belief that emancipation was a weapon to be used for a Northern victory and the preservation of the Union.

DURING THE WEEK

The Emancipation Proclamation was issued January 1, 1863; the Battle of Gettysburg was fought in July of that year; and Lincoln's famous Gettysburg Address was delivered November 18, 1863, at the dedication of a national cemetery on the battle site. Have one member of the family look up the details of the Battle of Gettysburg and another find and copy Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. (See *Quest Of A Hemisphere*, pp. 309-10.) Use the dinner hour or other discussion times during the week to talk about these two major historic events. Ask family members to memorize the Gettysburg Address.

•The Family Heritage Series

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For parents who wish to teach their children the true meaning of liberty, responsibility, and our Americanist heritage.

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