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Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society, Vol. 139, No. 1. (Mar., 1995), pp. 1-10.

Stable URL:

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Who Freed the Slaves?

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The traditional answer to the question posed by the title of this paper is: Abraham Lincoln freed the slaves. 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 today, the reply would, I think, be quite different. As Robert Engs put it: "THE SLAVES FREED THEMSELVES"¹ They saw the Civil War as a potential war for abolition well before Lincoln did. By voting with their feet for freedom—by escaping from their masters to 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."² 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 Civil War, these 190,000 black soldiers and sailors and a larger number of black army laborers tipped the balance in favor of Union victory.

The foremost exponent of the black self-emancipation thesis is the historian and theologian Vincent Harding whose book *There is a River: The Black Struggle for Freedom in America*, published in 1981, has become almost a Bible for the argument. "While Lincoln continued to hesitate about the legal, constitutional, moral, and military aspects of the matter," wrote Harding, "the relentless movement of the self-liberated fugitives into the Union lines . . . took their freedom into their own hands." The

¹ Robert F. Engs, "The Great American Slave Rebellion," paper delivered to the Civil War Institute at Gettysburg College, 27 June 1991, p. 3.

² Ira Berlin, Barbara J. Fields, Thavolia Glymph, Joseph P. Reidy, and Leslie S. Rowland, eds., *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation 1861-1867*, ser. 1, vol. 1, *The Destruction of Slavery* (Cambridge, 1985), 2.

Emancipation Proclamation, when it finally came, merely “confirmed and gave ambiguous legal standing to the freedom which black people had already claimed through their own surging, living proclamations.”³

This thesis has received the stamp of authority from the Freedmen and Southern Society project at the University of Maryland. The slaves, write the editors of this project, were “the prime movers in securing their own liberty.”⁴ Barbara J. Fields has given wide publicity to this theme. On camera in the PBS television documentary “The Civil War” and in an essay in the volume accompanying the series, she insisted that “freedom did not come to the slaves from words on paper, either the words of Congress or those of the President,” but “from the initiative of the slaves.”⁵

There are two corollaries of the self-emancipation thesis: 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 Harding, “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.”⁶ By exempting one-third of the South from the Emancipation Proclamation, writes Barbara Fields, “Lincoln was more determined to retain the goodwill of the slaveowners than to secure the liberty of the slaves.” Despite Lincoln, though, “no human being alive could have held back the tide that swept toward freedom.”⁷ But the white myth that Lincoln freed the slaves denied African-Americans credit for this great revolution; it was, writes Robert Engs, a sort of tacit conspiracy among whites to convince blacks that “white America, personified by Abraham Lincoln, had *given* them their freedom [rather] than allow them to realize the *empowerment* that their taking of it implied. The poor, uneducated freedman fell for that masterful propaganda stroke. But so have most of the rest of us, black and white, for over a century!”⁸

The self-emancipation thesis embodies an important truth. By coming into Union lines, by withdrawing their labor from Confederate owners, by working for the Union army and fighting as soldiers in it, slaves did play an active part in achieving their own freedom and, for that matter,

³ Vincent Harding, *There Is a River: The Black Struggle for Freedom in America* (New York, 1981), 231, 230, 228, 235.

⁴ Berlin et al., eds., *The Destruction of Slavery*, 3.

⁵ Barbara J. Fields, “Who Freed the Slaves?” in Geoffrey C. Ward, *The Civil War: An Illustrated History* (New York, 1990), 181.

⁶ Harding, *There Is a River*, 254, 216, 223. For a similar argument, see Nathan Irvin Huggins, *Slave and Citizen: The Life of Frederick Douglass* (Boston, 1980), 77, 102–03.

⁷ Fields, “Who Freed the Slaves?” in Ward, *The Civil War*, 179, 181.

⁸ Engs, “The Great American Slave Rebellion,” 13.

in preserving the Union. Like workers, immigrants, women, and other so-called “non-elites,” the slaves were neither passive victims nor pawns of powerful white males who loom so large in our traditional image of the past. They too made a history that historians have finally discovered. That is all to the good. But by challenging the “myth” that Lincoln freed the slaves, proponents of the self-emancipation thesis are in danger of creating another myth—that he had little to do with it. It may turn out, upon close examination, that 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.

First, 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 Civil War. Without the 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. 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. Every slave insurrection and insurrection conspiracy had failed in the end. On the eve of the Civil War, plantation agriculture was more profitable, slavery more entrenched, slaveowners more prosperous, and the “slave power” more dominant within the South, if not in the nation at large, than it had ever been. Without the war, the door to freedom would have remained closed for an indefinite time.

What brought war and opened that door? Secession and the refusal of the United States government to recognize its legitimacy. In these matters Abraham Lincoln moves to center stage. Seven states seceded and formed the Confederacy because he won the presidency on an anti-slavery 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 troops to suppress rebellion. The common denominator in all the steps that opened the door to freedom was the active agency of Lincoln as antislavery political leader, president-elect, president, and commander in chief.

The statement quoted earlier, that Lincoln “placed the preservation of the white Union above the death of black slavery,” while true in a narrow sense, is 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 first step toward placing it in the course of ultimate extinction. 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.” He attacked his main political rival, Stephen A. Douglas, for his “declared indifference” to the moral wrong of slavery. The principle of the Declaration of Independence and the principle of slavery,

said Lincoln, "cannot stand together. . . . Our republican robe is soiled" by slavery. "Let us repurify it. . . . Let us readopt the Declaration of Independence, and with it, the practices, and policy, which harmonize with it. . . . If we do this, we shall not only have saved the Union; but we shall have so saved it, as to make, and to keep it, forever worthy of the saving."⁹

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. It was not merely Lincoln's election, but his election as a *principled opponent of slavery on moral grounds* that precipitated secession. Abolitionists critical of Lincoln for falling short of their own standard nevertheless recognized this truth. No longer would the slave power rule the nation, said Frederick Douglass. "Lincoln's election has vitiated their authority, and broken their power."¹⁰

But, we might ask, would not the election of any Republican in 1860 have precipitated secession? Probably not, if the candidate had been Edward Bates, who might conceivably have won the election but had not even an outside 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 concessions to keep more from going out and perhaps to lure those seven back in. Most important of all, he probably would have evacuated Fort Sumter and thereby extinguished the spark that threatened to flame into war. As it was, Seward did his best to compel Lincoln into concessions and evacuation.

But Lincoln stood firm. When Seward flirted with the idea of supporting the Crittenden Compromise, Lincoln stiffened the backbones of Seward and other key Republicans. "Entertain no proposition for a compromise in regard to the *extension* of slavery," he wrote to them. "The tug has to come, & better now, than any time hereafter." Crittenden's compromise "would lose us everything we gained by the election. Filibustering for all South of us, and making slave states would follow . . . to put us again on the high-road to a slave empire." The proposal for concessions, Lincoln pointed out, "acknowledges that slavery has equal rights with liberty, and surrenders all we have contended for. . . . We have just carried an election on principles fairly stated to the people. Now we are told in advance, the government shall be broken up, unless we surrender to those we have beaten. . . . If we surrender, it is the end of us. They will repeat the experiment upon us *ad libitum*. A year will not pass, till

⁹ Roy P. Basler, ed., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 9 vols. (New Brunswick, NJ, 1951-55, 2:255, 275-76; 3:92).

¹⁰ Douglass' *Monthly*, December 1860.

we shall have to take Cuba as a condition upon which they will stay in the Union.”¹¹

These words shed a different light on the assertion, quoted earlier, that Lincoln “placed the preservation of the white Union above the death of black slavery.” The Crittenden Compromise did indeed place preservation of the Union above the death of slavery. So did Seward; so did most white Americans during the secession crisis. But that assertion does *not* describe Lincoln. He refused to yield the core of his antislavery philosophy to stay the breakup of the Union. As Lincoln expressed it in a private letter to his old friend Alexander Stephens, “You think slavery is *right* and ought to be extended; while we think it is *wrong* and ought to be restricted. That I suppose is the rub.”¹² It was indeed the rub. Even more than in his election to the presidency, Lincoln’s agency in refusing to compromise on the expansion of slavery or on Fort Sumter proved decisive. If any other man had been in his position, the course of history—and of emancipation—would have been different. Here we have without question a *sine qua non*.

It is quite true that once the war started, Lincoln moved more slowly and apparently more reluctantly toward making it a war for freedom 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 John C. Frémont and David 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, which provided for freeing 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 the 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 freed themselves and that Lincoln’s image as their emancipator is a myth. But let us take a closer look. 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. If the North won, slavery would be weakened if not destroyed; if the Confederacy won, slavery would survive and perhaps even grow stronger from the postwar territorial expansion of an independent and confident slave power. Thus Lincoln’s emphasis on the priority of Union had positive implications for emancipation, while premature actions against slavery might jeopardize the cause of Union and therefore boomerang in favor of slavery.

¹¹ Basler, ed., *Collected Works of Lincoln*, 4:149–51, 154, 183, 155, 172.

¹² *Ibid.*, 160.

Lincoln's chief concern of 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 against slavery, which would fragment it. If he had let Frémont's emancipation edict stand, explained Lincoln to his old friend Orville Browning of Illinois, it might have lost the war by driving Kentucky into secession. "I think to lose Kentucky is nearly the same as to lose the whole game. Kentucky gone, we can not hold Missouri, nor, as I think, Maryland. These all against us, and the job on our hands is too large for us. We would as well consent to separation at once, including the surrender of this capitol."¹³

There is no reason to doubt the sincerity—and sagacity—of this statement. Lincoln's greatest skills as a political leader were his sensitivity to public opinion and his sense of timing. Opinion in the North began to move toward emancipation as an instrument of war in the spring of 1862, though such a step at that time probably would still have weakened more than strengthened the Union coalition. During those spring months Lincoln alternately coaxed and prodded border-state Unionists toward recognition of the potential escalation of the conflict into a war against slavery and toward acceptance of his plan for compensated emancipation in their states. He warned southern Unionists and northern Democrats in the summer of 1862 that he could not fight this war "with elder-stalk squirts, charged with rose water. . . . This government cannot much longer play a game in which it stakes all, and its enemies stake nothing."¹⁴

Lincoln's meaning, though veiled, was clear; he was about to add the weapon of emancipation to his arsenal. For when he penned these warnings, he had made up his mind to issue an emancipation proclamation. Whereas a year earlier, even three months earlier, Lincoln had believed that avoidance of the slavery issue was necessary to maintain that knife-edge balance in the Union coalition, things had now changed. The imminent prospect of Union victory in the spring had been shredded by Robert E. Lee's successful counteroffensive in the Seven Days battles. The risks of alienating the border states and northern Democrats were now outweighed by the opportunity to energize the Republican majority and to mobilize part of the slave population for the cause of Union—and freedom. Lincoln had become convinced that emancipation was "a military necessity, absolutely essential to the preservation of the Union." "The slaves," he told his cabinet, were "undeniably an element of strength to those who had their service, and we must decide whether that element should be with us or against us." Lincoln had earlier hesitated to act against slavery in the states because the Constitution protected it there. But now he insisted that "the rebels could not at the same time throw off the Constitution and invoke its aid. . . . Decisive and extensive

¹³ *Ibid.*, 532.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 5:346, 350.

measures must be adopted. . . . We [want] the army to strike more vigorous blows. The Administration must set an example, and strike at the heart of the rebellion"—slavery.¹⁵ Lincoln was done conciliating the forces of conservatism. He had tried to make the border states see reason; now "we must make the forward movement" without them. "They [will] acquiesce, if not immediately, soon." As for northern Democrats, "their clubs would be used against us take what course we might."¹⁶

In 1864 Lincoln told a visiting delegation of abolitionists that two years earlier "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."¹⁷ Lincoln could actually 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 northern congressional elections in the fall of 1862 resulted in part from a voter backlash against the preliminary Proclamation. The morale crisis in Union armies during the winter of 1862–63 grew in part from a resentful conviction that Lincoln had 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 divisiveness diminish and emancipation gain something of an electoral mandate in the off-year state elections of 1863. In his annual message of December 8, 1863, Lincoln acknowledged that his Emancipation Proclamation a year earlier had been "followed by dark and doubtful days." But now, he added, "the crisis which threatened to divide the friends of the Union is past."¹⁸

Even that statement turned out to be premature. 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, while Sherman seemed similarly stymied before Atlanta and smaller Union armies elsewhere appeared to be accomplishing nothing. 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 though Jefferson Davis insisted that Confederate independence was his essential condition for peace, northern Democrats managed to convince many people that only Lincoln's insistence on emancipation

¹⁵ Gideon Welles, "The History of Emancipation," *The Galaxy* 14 (Dec. 1872), 842–43.

¹⁶ John G. Nicolay and John Hay, *Abraham Lincoln: A History*, 10 vols. (New York, 1890), 6:158–63.

¹⁷ Francis B. Carpenter, *Six Months at the White House with Abraham Lincoln* (New York, 1866), 76–77.

¹⁸ Basler, ed., *Collected Works of Lincoln*, 7:49–50.

blocked peace. A typical Democratic editorial declared that "tens of thousands of white men must yet bite the dust to allay the negro mania of the President."¹⁹

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. The Democratic national convention adopted a platform for the 1864 presidential election calling for peace negotiations to restore the Union—with slavery. Every political observer, including Lincoln himself, believed in August that the Republicans would lose the election. The *New York Times* editor and Republican national chairman Henry Raymond told Lincoln that "two special causes are assigned [for] this great reaction in public sentiment,—the want of military success, and the impression . . . that we *can* have peace with Union if we would . . . [but that you are] fighting not for Union but for the abolition of slavery."²⁰

The pressure caused Lincoln 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." Some 130,000 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."²¹

When Lincoln said this, he expected to lose the election. In effect he was saying that he would rather be right than president. In many ways this was his finest hour. As matters turned out, he was both right and president. Sherman's capture of Atlanta, Sheridan's victories in the Shenandoah Valley, and military success elsewhere transformed the northern mood from deepest despair in August to determined confidence by November, and Lincoln was triumphantly reelected. He won without compromising on the emancipation question. It is instructive to consider the possible alternatives to this outcome. If the Democrats had won, at best the Union would have been restored without a Thirteenth Amendment; at worst the Confederacy would have achieved its independence. In either case the institution of slavery would have survived. That this did not happen was owing more to the steadfast purpose of Abraham Lincoln than to any other single factor.

The proponents of the self-emancipation thesis, however, would avow

¹⁹ *Columbus Crisis*, 3 Aug. 1864.

²⁰ Raymond to Lincoln, 22 Aug. 1864, quoted in Basler, ed., *Collected Works of Lincoln*, 7:518.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 500, 506–07.

that all this is irrelevant because by the time of the Emancipation Proclamation "no human being alive could have held back the tide that swept toward freedom." But I disagree. The tide of freedom could have been swept back. On numerous occasions during the war, it was. When Union forces moved through or were compelled to retreat from areas of the Confederacy where their presence had attracted and liberated slaves, the tide of slavery closed in behind them and reenslaved those who could not keep up with the retreating or advancing armies. Many of the thousands that did keep up with the Army of the Ohio when it was forced out of Alabama and Tennessee by the Confederate invasion of Kentucky in the fall of 1862 were seized and sold as slaves by Kentuckians. Lee's army captured dozens of black people in Pennsylvania in June 1863 and sent them South into slavery. Hundreds of black Union soldiers captured by Confederate forces were reenslaved. Lincoln himself took note of this phenomenon when he warned that if "the pressure of the war should call off our forces from New Orleans to defend some other point, what is to prevent the masters from reducing the blacks to slavery again; for I am told that whenever the rebels take any black prisoners, free or slave, they immediately auction them off!"²² The editors of the *Freedmen and Southern Society* project concede that "Southern armies could recapture black people who had already reached Union lines. . . . Indeed, any Union retreat could reverse the process of liberation and throw men and women who had tasted freedom back into bondage. . . . Their travail testified to the link between the military success of the Northern armies and the liberty of Southern slaves."²³

Precisely. That is the crucial point. Most slaves did not emancipate themselves; they were liberated by Union armies. 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*.

But let us acknowledge that once the war was carried into slave territory, no matter how it came out, the ensuing "friction and abrasion" (as Lincoln once put it) would enable thousands of slaves to escape to freedom. In that respect, a degree of self-emancipation *did* occur. But even on a large scale, such emancipation was very different from *abolition of the institution of slavery*. That required Union victory; it required Lincoln's reelection in 1864; it required the Thirteenth Amendment. Lincoln played a vital role in all of these achievements. It was also his policies and his skillful political leadership that set in motion the processes by which the reconstructed or Unionist states of Louisiana, Arkansas, Tennessee, Maryland, and Missouri abolished the institution in those states during the war itself.

Regrettably, Lincoln did not live to see the final ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment. But if he had never lived, it seems safe to say that

²² *Ibid.*, 5:421.

²³ Berlin et al., eds., *The Destruction of Slavery*, 35–36.

we would not have had a Thirteenth Amendment in 1865. In that sense, 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, by breaking the chains of helpless and passive bondsmen with the stroke of a pen. But by pronouncing slavery a moral evil that must come to an end and then winning the presidency in 1860, 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.