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 so 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." 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."

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.

Like workers, immigrants, women, and other so-called "non-elites;' the slaves were neither passive victims nor pawns of powerful white males wo loon 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 woo 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 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 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 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 slaver 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.’

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 Fremont's emancipation eruct 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."

…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 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. 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. 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.”

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."

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 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.”

Even Republicans like Horace Greeley, who had criticized Lincoln two years earlier for slowness to embrace emancipation criticized him for refusing to abandon 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." 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.” 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. lt 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 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!" 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.”

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 formal ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment. But if he had never lived, it seems safe to say that 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 pronouncing slavery a moral evil hat 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.