

The Emancipation Proclamation

January 1, 1863 By the President of the United States of America:

"All persons held as slaves within any State or designated part of a State, the people whereof shall then be in rebellion against the United States, shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free; and the Executive Government of the United States, including the military and naval authority thereof, will recognize and maintain the freedom of such persons, and will do no act or acts to repress such persons, or any of them, in any efforts they may make for their actual freedom..."

...order and designate as the States and parts of States wherein the people thereof respectively, are this day in rebellion against the United States, the following, to wit:

Arkansas, Texas, Louisiana, (except the Parishes of St. Bernard, Plaquemines, Jefferson, St. John, St. Charles, St. James Ascension, Assumption, Terrebonne, Lafourche, St. Mary, St. Martin, and Orleans, including the City of New Orleans) Mississippi, Alabama, Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, and Virginia, (except the forty-eight counties designated as West Virginia, and also the counties of Berkley, Accomac, Northampton, Elizabeth City, York, Princess Ann, and Norfolk, including the cities of Norfolk and Portsmouth[]), and which excepted parts, are for the present, left precisely as if this proclamation were not issued.

And by virtue of the power, and for the purpose aforesaid, I do order and declare that all persons held as slaves within said designated States, and parts of States, are, and henceforward shall be free; and that the Executive government of the United States, including the military and naval authorities thereof, will recognize and maintain the freedom of said persons.

And I hereby enjoin upon the people so declared to be free to abstain from all violence, unless in necessary self-defense; and I recommend to them that, in all cases when allowed, they labor faithfully for reasonable wages...

And upon this act, sincerely believed to be an act of justice, warranted by the Constitution, upon military necessity, I invoke the considerate judgment of mankind, and the gracious favor of Almighty God...

By the President: ABRAHAM LINCOLN
WILLIAM H. SEWARD, Secretary of State.

Lincoln's View of Slavery

Although Lincoln disliked slavery, he did not believe that the federal government had the power to abolish it where it already existed. As the war progressed, however, Lincoln did find a way to use his constitutional war powers to end slavery. Slave labor built fortifications and grew food for the Confederacy. As commander in chief, Lincoln decided that, just as he could order the Union army to seize Confederate supplies, he could also authorize the army to emancipate slaves.

Emancipation offered a strategic benefit. The abolitionists' movement was strong in Britain, and emancipation would discourage Britain from supporting the Confederacy. Emancipation was not just a moral issue; it became a weapon of war.

Emancipation Proclamation

On January 1, 1863, Lincoln issued his Emancipation Proclamation. It did not free any slaves immediately because it applied only to areas behind Confederate lines, outside Union control. Since the Proclamation was a military action aimed at the states in rebellion, it did not apply to Southern territory already occupied by Union troops nor to the slave states that had not seceded.

Reaction to the Proclamation

Although the Proclamation did not have much practical effect, it had immense symbolic importance. For many, it gave the war a high moral purpose by turning the struggle into a fight to free the slaves. Free blacks also welcomed the section of the Proclamation that allowed them to enlist in the Union army. Even though many had volunteered at the beginning of the war, the regular army had refused to take them. Now they could fight and help put an end to slavery.

Not everyone in the North approved of the Emancipation Proclamation. The Democrats claimed that it would only prolong the war by antagonizing the South. Many Union soldiers accepted it grudgingly, saying they had no love for abolitionists or African Americans, but they would support emancipation if that was what it took to reunify the nation.

Confederates reacted to the Proclamation with outrage. Jefferson Davis called it the "most execrable [hateful] measure recorded in the history of guilty man." As Northern Democrats had predicted, the Proclamation had made the Confederacy more determined than ever to fight to preserve its way of life.

After the Emancipation Proclamation, compromise was no longer an option. The Confederacy knew that if it lost its slave-holding society would perish, and the Union knew that it could win only by completely defeating the Confederacy. From January 1863 on, it was a fight to the death.