

Abraham Lincoln's Great Awakening: From Moderate to Abolitionist

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Abraham Lincoln is often admired for being the very model of the progressive politician, a crusading visionary who sealed his place in history with his farsighted, morally righteous decision to emancipate the slaves during the Civil War.

The truth, historians say, is more complicated. Lincoln certainly deserves credit for signing the Emancipation Proclamation and for throwing his weight behind the 13th Amendment, banning slavery, but many historians are quick to point out that the Great Emancipator's civil rights achievements weren't entirely of his own volition. In a series of recent books and essays, scholars argue that Lincoln, like most presidents, had to be pushed—in his case, by black abolitionists and "radical" Republicans—to listen to his own "better angels" and took action only when it became politically feasible.

There is no doubt, of course, that Lincoln hated the institution of slavery. "A blind man can see where the president's heart is," Douglass said. But when Lincoln took office, he was no abolitionist, a position that was considered radical at the time. Lincoln had campaigned against the expansion of slavery into new states and territories, but he didn't believe the Constitution allowed the federal government to eliminate it outright.

Through his first year as president, he stood the same ground, steering a centrist course between slaveholding Southerners and their opponents in the North. In his first inaugural, in which he offered a delicately worded olive branch to the seven Southern states that had seceded from the Union, he made no mention of the issue. "We are not enemies, but friends," Lincoln said. "We must not be enemies."

In the span of only a few years, though, as war consumed his presidency, Lincoln's views on slavery dramatically shifted. He surprised his own cabinet in 1862 with his plans to issue an emancipation proclamation. And though he still occasionally floated the idea of "colonizing" African-Americans, in the months before he died, Lincoln had not only given slaves their freedom; he'd also begun to promote full equality, including voting rights, for blacks.

The decision, sadly, would prove to have dire consequences. When John Wilkes Booth, a young actor sympathetic to the Southern cause, heard Lincoln's promises, he told a friend: "That means nigger citizenship. Now, by God, I'll put him through. That is the last speech he will ever make." Three days later, Booth shot Lincoln at Ford's Theatre in Washington.

Historians have been wrestling, ever since, with what it was, exactly, that changed Lincoln from an antislavery moderate to the Great Emancipator, and more and more scholars have come to believe that it wasn't just Lincoln's own great compassion. "It was not simply that he was wisely biding his time and waiting for Northern antislavery sentiment to mature in order to move on emancipation," writes Manisha Sinha, an associate professor of Afro-American studies at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst, in *Our Lincoln: New Perspectives on Lincoln and His World*. "He himself had to be convinced."

Lincoln had his reasons, of course, for avoiding the subject of slavery. The greatest good, he felt, was preserving the Union, and he knew the war would be lost before it began without the slaveholding border states. "I hope to have God on my side," Lincoln said. "But I must have Kentucky."

Lincoln also believed he was constitutionally bound, as president, to leave slavery alone. "If I could save the Union without freeing any slave I would do it, and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone I would also do that," he wrote in a letter to Horace Greeley, the editor of the *New York Tribune*. But he felt his oath of office would not permit it. "I have here stated my purpose according to my view of official duty," Lincoln wrote, "and I intend no modification of my oft-expressed personal wish that all men everywhere could be free."

Wishes are one thing, though, and actions another. And, more than anything, historians say, what changed between the first year of the war, when Lincoln was silent on the subject of slavery, and the second, when Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, was the political climate. "Lincoln himself insisted that he did not claim to have controlled events—that events controlled him," says Eric Foner, a professor of history at Columbia University. "He may have been deeply antislavery, but he was no abolitionist. Before he became one, he had to be pushed."

When he took office, Lincoln had gone about as far as he thought he could go on the issue of slavery. He'd approved a policy that designated runaway slaves "contraband" of war and even eliminated slavery in Washington, D.C., which was under the direct control of the



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Lincoln had rescinded an order, though, by the general overseeing Missouri in 1861 that would have liberated all the slaves in the state. "I think there is a great danger," Lincoln wrote in a letter before relieving the general of his command, that the "confiscation of property, and the liberating of slaves of traitorous owners, will alarm our Southern Union friends, and turn them against us."

Lincoln thought he had a better idea. In the spring and summer of 1862, more than a year into his first term, he met with representatives of the border states—Delaware, Maryland, West Virginia, Kentucky, and Missouri—and asked them to adopt a plan of gradual, compensated emancipation on their own. In Delaware, he'd floated the idea of the federal government paying slave owners \$400 per slave, with all adult slaves over 35 being freed immediately. Lincoln suggested the rest of the slaves should be freed in 10 years.

This, historians say, was a critical moment for Lincoln. While he was struggling to maintain the loyalty of the border states, after all, abolitionists were practically battering down his door. After he had abolished slavery in the District of Columbia, antislavery advocates worried that the president's "face was turned toward Zion, but he seemed to move with leaden feet." The abolition movement was gaining political strength, deluging Congress with petitions calling for the end of slavery. Black leaders like Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman were publicly challenging Lincoln to take action.

Lincoln's political allies, meanwhile, were also doing their utmost in letters and personal meetings to convince him that emancipation would help the war effort. Charles Sumner, a Massachusetts senator who worried that radical Republicans would split with Lincoln if he did not act, may have had the biggest effect. Sumner spent months in 1861 and 1862 trying to make Lincoln understand that emancipation would have far-reaching consequences, cutting off the Confederacy from potential allies in Europe—who opposed slavery—while also drastically undermining the Southern economy. After one meeting with Sumner, Lincoln seemed to cave in: "Well, Mr. Sumner," he said, "the only difference between you and me on this subject is a difference of a month or six weeks in time."

The turning point came in the summer of 1862, when the border states rejected, once and for all, Lincoln's proposals of gradual emancipation. "This was a decisive moment," says Ronald White, a visiting professor of history at UCLA and author of *A. Lincoln*, a new biography. Though the Confederate army was still strong, after a year of warfare, the border states were no longer in serious danger. Slaves had begun to escape from the South by the tens of thousands, and Lincoln, who had come into office determined to uphold the Constitution, recognized that emancipation could be legally justified as a wartime seizure of enemy "property."

"He got kind of fed up with the border states," says McPherson. "Clearly, the radical wing of the Republican Party was pushing for this virtually since the beginning of the war. And the longer the war went on, the more plausible their argument seemed: You can't win a war against an enemy that's sustained by and is fighting for slavery without striking against slavery itself."

The politics of slavery, in other words, had changed, and Lincoln, historians believe, was among the first to recognize it. "He was constantly goaded on this issue," says Douglas Wilson, codirector of the Lincoln Studies Center at Knox College in Illinois. Eventually, Lincoln realized that the political ground had shifted beneath him.

Only a few months after his proposals were rejected by the border states, Lincoln floated the idea of emancipation for the first time to his cabinet members. Surprised, they suggested he wait to announce such a radical change in policy until after a military victory. That victory came on Sept. 17, 1862, when an invading Confederate army was turned back at the Battle of Antietam in Maryland. Five days later, Lincoln issued a preliminary Emancipation Proclamation.

That winter, when he gave his annual address to Congress, Lincoln seemed to acknowledge that the war's purpose had been irrevocably altered. "The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present," he said. "The occasion is piled high with difficulty, and we must rise with the occasion. As our case is new, so we must think anew, and act anew. We must disenthrall ourselves, and then we shall save our country." On Jan. 1, 1863, Lincoln's proclamation went into effect, freeing the slaves held in the South. In a final nod to the political importance of the border states, though, it did not apply outside the Confederacy.

In the years to come, Lincoln would continue pursuing his slow progress toward civil rights, allowing black soldiers to fight for the Union and ultimately pushing for black citizenship. But it was with emancipation that he first pushed, and was pushed, into history.

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