

Emancipation Proclamation

Although President Lincoln had a reputation for being an abolitionist, his political record indicated this label was not completely accurate. Lincoln focused his political stance regarding slavery on the prevention of its spread into the territories. After becoming president he initially resisted laws by the federal government called the Confiscation Acts that pushed the Union toward abolition. The first of these acts, the Confiscation Act of 1861, approved on August 6, 1861, granted freedom for all slaves who had served in the Confederate military. It also allowed for Union seizure of all rebel property. This act was only enforced in areas where the Union Army had a presence.

President Lincoln resisted this act because he feared the effect it would have on the political climate. He worried this act might influence the Border States—so critical to the Northern cause—toward secession to protect their slavery system. In an attempt to curb the emancipation, he ordered Union commanders to refuse escaped and liberated slaves admittance to their military units.

However, Congress pushed forward toward emancipation with a second Confiscation Act on July 17, 1862. This act was more direct, declaring freedom for the slaves of civilian and military Confederate officials. Although a vital step toward complete emancipation, this act also was only enforced in areas with a Union military presence.

Lincoln continued to refrain from offering full-fledged support of abolition, believing that the political climate was not ready to support it. The abolitionists grew impatient, but Lincoln believed that such a revolutionary change should only follow a significant victory on the battlefield. His opportunity came following the battle of Antietam.

Antietam Creek, Maryland, was the site of a showdown between the Confederate General Robert E. Lee and the Union General George McClellan on September 17, 1862. It proved to be the bloodiest single day of fighting of the entire Civil War. The battle had no clear winner, but the Union demonstrated surprising strength, giving Lincoln the positive political climate he sought for his proclamation.

The preliminary proclamation came on September 23, 1862, immediately following Antietam. In this address, Lincoln outlined the terms of freedom for slaves in states that were still in rebellion. It also indicated that Lincoln's final Emancipation Proclamation would be issued January 1, 1863. Despite its title, the Emancipation Proclamation did not immediately free any slaves since it could not be enforced in those states it targeted. Although the Proclamation foreshadowed the end of slavery, those expecting an immediate effect were sorely disappointed.

Lincoln's purpose for the Proclamation was not the immediate freedom of all slaves. Rather, he hoped the declaration would weaken the moral cause of the South, while strengthening the Union's moral cause. He felt that with the Proclamation the Civil War now had a "higher purpose," which Lincoln sought to leverage for the Union.

Reaction to the Proclamation was varied. Some questioned the constitutionality of the decree, while others ignored it completely. Border states were not affected by the Proclamation but they continued to watch Lincoln's actions with a wary eye. Northerners—particularly those in the northwest—took a harsher view, believing that Lincoln had again acted with too-heavy a hand, while abolitionists approved of the measure and sought stricter enforcement. Meanwhile, Southerners continued to fear an insurrection by their slaves.

Since most slaves were illiterate, news of the Emancipation Proclamation reached them largely by word of mouth. About 800,000 slaves should have been freed by the declaration, but none gained immediate freedom. Slave owners did not voluntarily free their slaves, but many blacks took advantage of the declaration to leave their owners and join the Union Army to support those who had upheld their freedom.

Nearly 200,000 black soldiers played an important role in the Civil War, with 16 eventually earning Medals of Honor, the nation's highest honor for valor. However, they faced great challenges throughout the war, even from the people who were employing them to fight. Black Union soldiers received a net monthly pay of \$7, while their white counterparts received almost double that amount.

Black soldiers also faced the threat of torture and death if they were captured by the Confederacy. President Lincoln declared that the Union would retaliate if black Union Prisoners of War were tortured by their Confederate captors, but this declaration was largely ignored. In light of these threats, it is noteworthy that former slaves accepted the risks of military service over slavery and the risks of trying to integrate into civilian society.

These former slaves filled a void created by increasing desertions of Union soldiers. The deserters were unhappy with the shift in the purpose of the war. Many men felt that the only true purpose should be the fight for unity of the North and the South, and they were unhappy that the cause had shifted to include abolitionism.

The Emancipation Proclamation also had a profound effect on the congressional election of 1862. Northerners spoke with their votes, letting the administration know that they were not happy with the current political tide. Although it was not a presidential election year, Congressional elections saw several changes from the previous election. Republicans fared poorly in New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, and even Republican President Lincoln's home state of Illinois, although the Democrats still did not have the numbers to take control of Congress.

Another important political effect of the Proclamation was the changing sentiment in Europe. During the Battle of Antietam, the British and French governments had been on the verge of rushing in to provide mediation, but that urgency cooled with General Lee's retreat across the Potomac. When the Emancipation Proclamation was declared, European working classes sympathized with the measure and the Union won its favor. With this action, Europe no longer felt intervention was necessary.