

# The enduring significance of the Emancipation Proclamation

By Shannon Jones  
2 June 2004

*Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation: The End of Slavery in America*, by Allen C. Guelzo (Simon & Schuster, 2004)

This work, the first major treatment on the Emancipation Proclamation in 40 years, is well written and highly informative. The author, Allan C. Guelzo, is a professor of American history at Eastern University in Pennsylvania. His book, *Abraham Lincoln, Redeemer President*, shared the Lincoln Prize in 2000.

Lincoln's proclamation, which took effect January 1, 1863, in the midst of the American Civil War, imparted to the conflict, which until then had been waged as a struggle to preserve the union, a social revolutionary character. It initiated one of the largest property transfers in history, expropriating the principal form of property in one third of the United States, an action that reverberates to this day. It freed 4 million slaves valued at \$3 billion. By comparison, as a proportion of national wealth, this would represent several trillion current US dollars.

The author does not share the opinion, widespread among contemporary historians, that the failure of emancipation to lead to full equality diminishes the historical stature of Lincoln. He insists that emancipation was perhaps the single most significant act ever carried out by a US president.

He affirms the democratic and revolutionary significance of the Emancipation Proclamation and rebuts those who would seek to diminish its importance by claiming that Lincoln more or less blundered into it, that it did not actually free any slaves, or that it was forced on him by the threat of European intervention.

The author holds, on the contrary, that emancipation, while it did not necessarily take the form Lincoln initially envisioned, was the outcome of a conscious policy he had been pursuing at least since his inauguration.

To attack the significance of the Emancipation Proclamation is to question the progressive historical role of Lincoln. Like the spate of recent attacks on Thomas Jefferson, attempts to diminish the stature of Lincoln aim at sowing skepticism in the possibility of revolutionary change and the very idea of human progress.

In his preface, Guelzo calls Lincoln "America's last Enlightenment politician." He notes Lincoln's affection for the radical freethinker Thomas Paine and Scottish poet Robert Burns. He writes: "If there was any cardinal doctrine among Lincoln's beliefs, it was his confidence in the inevitability of progress.... His was a typically Enlightenment kind of optimism, coming from a man born at the end of the long Enlightenment era and steeped in the conviction that the American founding 'contemplated the progressive improvement in the condition of all men everywhere'" (p. 149).

When Lincoln took office in March 1861, he was committed to a policy of containing slavery, not its abolition. To the chagrin of radicals, he opposed any measures affecting slavery in areas where it already existed. However, little more than a year later, he was contemplating a policy more sweeping than that advocated by all but the most extreme abolitionists. Guelzo traces this remarkable shift.

Lincoln's policy had the virtue of "prudence," asserts Guelzo, in the classical sense of good judgment: the ability to size up a situation and make the most out of it. At every point, he sought to choose those methods most suitable to the battle against slavery.

The Civil War unfolded according to its own internal logic. Although Lincoln himself, though an opponent of slavery, was not an abolitionist, ultimately the only way in which the aims of the North could be achieved was through the extirpation of slavery. It is to Lincoln's credit that he was able to grasp this necessity and boldly act in a timely manner.

Guelzo notes that one of Lincoln's paramount concerns was to keep his actions within strict constitutional bounds. One of his fears was that actions against slavery based on his executive authority might be overturned by the pro-slavery Supreme Court headed by Justice Roger B. Taney. (1)

Only weeks after Lincoln's inauguration, the Confederacy consummated its break with the union by firing on Fort Sumter in South Carolina, one of the last federal military outposts in the South. Lincoln responded by issuing a call for volunteers to put down the rebellion, signaling the beginning of full-scale civil war.

In the first months of the conflict, Lincoln felt constrained by the need to placate the critical border states of Missouri, Kentucky, Maryland and Delaware. In these states, slavery was legal, but the state legislatures contained unionist majorities and did not vote to join the Confederacy. Lincoln feared that precipitate action against slavery would strengthen secessionist forces in these areas. Thus, to the dismay of the abolitionists, he presented the war primarily as a struggle to preserve the Union. Lincoln even countermanded a martial law order by General John C. Fremont freeing the slaves of rebel sympathizers in Missouri.

The reluctance of the federal government to officially embrace anti-slavery did not deter slaves from fleeing the plantations and seeking protection within Union lines. As the war progressed, federal soldiers became increasingly reluctant to return runaways to their former owners.

Guelzo notes: "The decision by white soldiers to intervene on behalf of black strangers was so widespread that it becomes easy to miss how utterly extraordinary these interventions were, especially since they were happening in the face of commanders' direct contrary orders" (p. 79).

As losses and difficulties mounted, it became clear that the issue of slavery would have to be directly addressed. Still determined to proceed on a constitutional basis, Lincoln advanced a proposal in the closing weeks of 1861 for federal support for gradual, compensated emancipation by action of the legislatures of the border states. If these states voluntarily adopted emancipation, Lincoln hoped, the Confederacy would be demoralized, realizing it had no hope of drawing the border states to its side.

Reflecting a significant hardening of public opinion in the North against slavery, in April 1862 the US Congress voted to abolish the institution in the District of Columbia, the one area where it had the undisputed power to do so. However, the idea of freeing slaves, even if fully compensated,

met bitter resistance in all of the border states. In Missouri, a plan for gradual emancipation failed in the legislature by a vote of 59-18. The proposal fared no better in Kentucky and Maryland. It even met strong opposition in tiny Delaware, which had a slave population of just 1,300.

Lincoln was taken aback by the intransigence of the border states. Meanwhile, the strength of Confederate resistance was pushing Lincoln toward taking more decisive action.

Union armies scored important military successes in the spring of 1862, but by the summer the tide of war seemed to be turning in favor of the Confederacy. Of particular concern to Lincoln was the inertia of General George McClellan, whose Army of the Potomac, after many delays, had advanced to the gates of the Confederate capital Richmond, only to be driven back by a smaller rebel force. It now languished near where it had started, its commander showing no interest in further fighting.

The conflict between McClellan and Lincoln had been growing since Lincoln appointed him to head Union forces in the east. It reflected political conflicts within the North itself. While McClellan was by all accounts a skilled military organizer, he shared the views of Northern Democrats.

Before the Civil War, the Democratic Party was the main party of slavery. It represented an alliance of Southern slaveholders with sections of Northern business most directly tied in with the plantation system. The Democrats split along North/South regional lines before the election of 1860, with the two factions fielding rival presidential candidates. While generally supporting the preservation of the Union, Northern Democrats held that the war had at all costs to avoid impinging on slavery. A significant section of the Democratic Party favored a negotiated solution with the Confederacy that would leave slavery intact. Reflecting this conciliationist position, McClellan had consistently shown a disinclination for aggressive military action.

Guelzo relates that Lincoln decided in July to visit McClellan and his army in Virginia to personally evaluate the situation. To Lincoln's surprise, the general presented the president with a letter in which he arrogantly lectured the chief of state on the proper conduct of the war. McClellan made no secret of his opposition to emancipation.

He wrote, "Military power should not be allowed to interfere with the relations of servitude, either by supporting or impairing the authority of the master.... [A] declaration of radical views, especially upon slavery, will rapidly disintegrate our present Armies" (p. 106).

It was hardly a secret that McClellan personally despised Lincoln and blamed the civilian administration in Washington for all of the army's setbacks. Rumors even circulated within the Union staff that McClellan, a Democrat, planned to march on Washington and depose the Republican administration.

The meeting with McClellan appears to have been one of the crucial events that convinced Lincoln to issue the Emancipation Proclamation. Still, he made one more attempt to convince border state representatives to accept gradual emancipation. However, despite a strenuous effort on his part, he was again rebuffed.

With the Union stymied on the battlefield and insubordination growing within the leadership of its largest army, the North faced a turning point. As Karl Marx, at that time living in London, wrote in a letter to his collaborator Frederick Engels, "The long and short of it seems to be that a war of this kind must be conducted along revolutionary lines, while the Yankees have so far been trying to conduct it constitutionally" (Karl Marx to Frederick Engels, Aug 7, 1862; published in *The Civil War in the United States*, International Publishers, 1971, p. 253).

On July 22, 1863, at a cabinet meeting, Lincoln made a startling announcement. On the basis of his power as commander in chief, he proposed to issue a proclamation freeing all slaves in Confederate-held territory as of Jan 1, 1863, if the rebels did not rejoin the Union.

The revolutionary character of this edict was partially masked by the

formal legal language in which it was couched. However, its boldness stunned even the most ardent opponents of slavery. As Guelzo comments, Lincoln "would, to lay it out in detail, override the authority of state slave codes; override even the sanctity of property ownership and civil court process; make no promise of compensation unless the rebel states actually laid down arms...." (p. 120).

Salmon Chase, secretary of the treasury, one of the most radical members in the cabinet, raised reservations, expressing the fear that such a proclamation might call forth a general slave uprising across the South. He proposed leaving it to individual Union commanders to proclaim emancipation in their own military districts.

Other cabinet members warned that the proclamation would have a disastrous impact on Republican chances in the upcoming congressional elections. Democrats, they correctly anticipated, would attempt to incite racial fears among white Northerners.

Lincoln made it clear to his cabinet that he had determined to issue the proclamation with or without their consent. However, he did agree to a proposal by Secretary of State William Seward to at least delay its promulgation until Union forces had won a significant battle.

The North had to wait a considerable period, but on September 17, federal forces forced the Confederate army headed by General Robert E. Lee to withdraw at Antietam in Maryland in the bloodiest single day of the Civil War. The battle reversed a tide of Confederate victories and enabled Lincoln to at last issue the Emancipation Proclamation.

Having come to the conclusion that emancipation was necessary to preserve the Union, Lincoln underscored his determination to push it with all his force. "Once the Proclamation took effect," Lincoln remarked to T.J. Barnett, "the character of the war will be changed. It will be one of subjugation and extermination" (p. 156).

The Democrats, as expected, appealed to racial prejudice. For example in New York, the Democratic candidate for governor, Horatio Seymour, denounced emancipation as "a proposal for the butchery of women and children, for scenes of lust and rapine, for arson and murder unparalleled in the history of the world" (p. 166).

In the fall elections, the Republicans suffered a loss of 34 seats in the House of Representatives and several governorships, including New York. However, they managed to retain a majority in the House and actually increased their majority in the Senate.

Guelzo notes that while Lincoln had invoked military necessity to justify emancipation, "It seems never to have entered his head to use his war powers to declare a national emergency and suspend the elections" (p. 167). There can be little doubt that for Lincoln such an action, even if to some extent justified by the danger posed by the strong body of Southern sympathizers in the North, would have conflicted with the main purpose of the war—the defense of the democratic and egalitarian ideals embodied in the US constitution and the Declaration of Independence.

The first act that Lincoln carried out following the November 1862 elections was to dismiss McClellan, who, as noted earlier, bitterly opposed making the abolition of slavery a war aim. McClellan had failed to capitalize on his army's victory at Antietam. He had dallied for weeks before pursuing the defeated Confederate army into Virginia, even resisting direct orders to advance. Lincoln was so infuriated that, even though McClellan retained considerable personal popularity within the army, he decided to remove him regardless of the consequences.

The North, however, continued to suffer setbacks on the battlefield. McClellan's replacement, General Ambrose Burnside, led the Union army to defeat at Fredericksburg, Virginia, ordering an ill-considered frontal attack that was repulsed with terrible losses. The continuing stubborn resistance of the South, however, did not weaken Lincoln's resolve.

As the January 1 deadline for emancipation approached, tensions increased in the North. Some even predicted that Lincoln would back out

of his pledge to free the slaves. However, on December 29, Lincoln presented the final draft of the proclamation to his cabinet.

On New Year's Day, Lincoln signed the final corrected version of the document. He had not slept the previous night.

Guelzo describes the scene: "Some time that afternoon, the two Swards reappeared with a corrected version of the proclamation and the handwritten draft Lincoln had finished earlier that day. By that time, Lincoln was thoroughly exhausted. 'I was tired that day,' he admitted later to New Jersey Congressman James Scovel, but his determination to finish this work was as high as heaven. With the engrossed copy spread before him, Lincoln picked up a pen he had already promised to Charles Sumner as a keepsake and, after dipping it in his inkwell, moved to sign it. His hand and forearm were trembling, and he put down the pen.

"After a moment he tried again, and again the shaking in his enormous bony hand made him set the pen on his desk. 'I could not for a moment control my arm,' Lincoln later told his loyal congressional ally Isaac Arnold. 'I paused and a superstitious feeling came over me which made me hesitate.' Was this all a mistake? Was the trembling a sign, yet another divine warning, that he had gone too far, had over-reached himself, had taken a step that would end only in disaster? Then he remembered, 'that I had been shaking hands for hours, with several hundred people.' As much to assure himself as the Swards, Lincoln declared that 'I never in my life felt more certain that I was doing right than I do in signing this paper.'

"...And he signed 'slowly and carefully,' cramping the final 'm' in his first name and the loop of the 'L' at the beginning of Lincoln. There it was, as clear as it needed to be: *Abraham Lincoln*. He looked up with a smile 'and a laugh followed at his apprehension,' and he remarked quietly, 'That will do'" (pp. 182-3).

That historic day, enormous crowds gathered in every major Northern city. Guelzo describes the scene based on a contemporary report in the *New York Times*: "In New York, an enormous 'grand jubilee' was organized at the 'colored' Shiloh Presbyterian Church for the evening of December 31. 'By 9 o'clock in the evening the church was filled to overflowing, nearly one-third of the audience being white.' Speaker after speaker hailed the dawn of emancipation, and when the clock struck twelve, 'the Chairman read a dispatch from Washington, saying that President Lincoln would issue the Emancipation Proclamation at 12 o'clock M., today.' The crowd went up in 'tumultuous cheers, which lasted some minutes, and were followed by three cheers for Abraham Lincoln, three cheers for freedom & c. &c.'" (pp. 183-4).

Crowds of black and white citizens gathered outside the White House, calling for Lincoln to come out. In response, the president came to the window and bowed.

In the following weeks and months, the legal merit of the proclamation was debated at great length. Many, including Lincoln, feared that the Supreme Court might overturn it on appeal after the conclusion of the war. Others mocked it as a paper bullet that only freed slaves in areas where the federal government had no authority.

However, the impact of the proclamation was immediate and decisive. It changed the dynamic of the war by turning the federal armies into agents of liberation and by giving slaves a direct and vital interest in the defeat of the South.

Despite predictions that it would spark mass desertions, Union soldiers largely accepted the proclamation. Some welcomed it enthusiastically, like a Minnesota corporal who wrote to his wife, "Abraham has gone and done it at last. Yesterday will be a day hallowed in the hearts of millions of people in these United States & also by friends of liberty and humanity the world over" (quoted from *For Cause and Comrades*, James McPherson, Oxford University Press, 1997, pp. 121).

Emancipation enormously raised the stature of the Union cause internationally. By turning the Civil War into a war against slavery,

Lincoln attracted to the side of the North workers and progressive-minded people all over the world. It greatly complicated the position of those governments—in the first place, that of Great Britain—who were considering intervention on the side of the Confederacy.

In Britain, the textile industry had come to a virtual standstill due to the Union blockade of the South's cotton exports. Yet, the working people of Britain rebuffed the attempts of demagogues to direct their anger against the North.

Guelzo writes: "Between January and March 1863, a series of mass demonstrations in Manchester and London cheered Lincoln and his proclamation. Lincoln replied that they would have the 'admiration, esteem and the most reciprocal feelings of friendship among the American people'" (p. 205).

The author answers the question, Did emancipation contribute to the military defeat of the South?, with a categorical "yes." He writes, "The presidential mandate for freedom triggered a cascade of running away in 1863 that began sweeping off the underpinnings of slavery. 'The hopes of freedom, kindled by the emancipation proclamation, paralyzed the industrial power of the rebellion' wrote Secretary of War Stanton in evaluating the cause of Southern defeat. 'Slaves seized their chances to escape; discontent and distrust were engendered; the hopes of the slave and the fears of the master...shook more and more the fabric built on human slavery'" (p. 214).

The proclamation managed to destabilize slavery even where it still technically remained legal. In Missouri and Tennessee, areas exempted from the Emancipation Proclamation, slaves deserted plantations en masse. By January 1864, one Union general declared that slavery was "virtually dead in Tennessee" (p. 215).

"Whatever the fine print of exemption, 'Negroes (now have) altogether different feelings from those of former times,' wrote a federal provost marshal in the summer of 1863, 'a spirit of independence—a feeling they are no longer slaves'" (p. 229).

Slavery was further undermined by Lincoln's decision, spelled out in the Emancipation Proclamation, to recruit black soldiers into the Union army. The Union eventually recruited 200,000 African-Americans, who served on every front. " 'Every Negro regiment of a thousand men presents just one thousand unanswerable arguments against the revocation of the President's proclamation,' rejoiced Zachariah Chandler (radical Republican senator from Michigan), and 'every fight wherein a Negro regiment distinguishes itself by desperate valor...adds fourfold to their number and weight'" (p. 219).

Nevertheless, Lincoln became convinced of the need for a constitutional amendment banning slavery if emancipation was to be secure. Meanwhile, support for such an amendment mounted throughout the North. On April 8, 1864, the Senate passed the Thirteenth Amendment outlawing slavery. It failed, however, to get the required two-thirds majority in the House, due to the obstruction of the Democrats. However, public pressure forced enough Democrats to change their votes so that the House ratified the amendment on January 31, 1865.

At the time of his assassination in April 1865, Lincoln was considering giving the right to vote to the freed slaves. In his last speech, on April 11, 1865, Lincoln expressed dissatisfaction that the newly adopted Louisiana state constitution did not grant the franchise to at least a portion of the black population. Lincoln's assassin, John Wilkes Booth, heard that speech, which apparently helped firm his resolve to carry out the assassination of the president three days later.

In the final chapter of his book, Guelzo expresses concern over the growth of disenchantment with Lincoln and the Emancipation Proclamation, particularly since the 1960s and the rise of black nationalism. As a recent expression of this tendency, he points to the 1999 book by Lerone Bennett, *Forced into Glory: Abraham Lincoln's White Dreams*.

Guelzo writes: “The withdrawal from Lincoln by African-Americans has moved in step with the emergence of a profound nihilism in the minds of many Americans, who see no meaning in American freedom and no hope for real racial progress” (p. 248).

Those historians like Bennett who see no democratic content to the Civil War base their analysis on a false and one-sided selection of facts. They tear events out of their historical context in order to deny the obvious progressive content of Lincoln’s actions. Isolated statements by Lincoln, reflecting dominant prejudices of the time, are advanced to claim he was a racist.

The lack of a worked-out conception of history and the inability to deal with contradiction are the hallmarks of such critiques. To understand the significance of emancipation, as well as its limitations, it is necessary to put this event in its historical and international context.

Bennett and other contemporary critics of Lincoln present the conditions currently facing millions of blacks—unemployment, poverty, and lack of access to quality education, health care and housing—as proof of the failure of the Civil War to carry through the democratic revolution in America. In fact, these social ills arise from the conditions inevitably produced by American and world capitalism, and the delay in the victory of the socialist revolution.

The struggle against chattel slavery waged by Lincoln and the North inevitably had limits. In the long run, the democratic ideals that underlay the Emancipation Proclamation could not be realized on the basis of a society dominated by class exploitation.

The rise of monopoly capitalism in the aftermath of the Civil War led not to equality, but rather to ever-deeper inequality. As the present-day assault on democratic rights in the US and all the major industrialized countries shows, democracy is ultimately incompatible with the ever-greater concentration of wealth and the growth of social inequality.

This does not mean that it is correct to draw the cynical conclusion that emancipation was a meaningless gesture. Rather, it signifies that the struggle for equality must be taken to a deeper and more fundamental level. A new revolution in property relations is an urgent necessity, attacking poverty, oppression and inequality by placing finance and industry under the democratic ownership and control of the working population.

**Note:**

(1) Roger B. Taney (1777-1864). In 1858, the Supreme Court headed by Taney issued the infamous Dred Scott decision. It declared, in effect, that Congress had no power to limit the expansion of slavery into the territories and even the “free” states of the North.

To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>