

150 years since the Emancipation Proclamation

22 September 2012

On September 22, 1862, President Abraham Lincoln made public the Emancipation Proclamation. When it took effect on January 1, 1863, the executive order legally freed some 4 million slaves in the rebel-held areas of the American South.

The Emancipation Proclamation turned the Civil War into a social revolution. It transformed the struggle, waged by the North until then as a war to preserve the Union as it had existed in 1860, into a war for the destruction of slavery and the social and political order that rested upon it.

Given its momentous character and Lincoln's well-earned reputation as a master of prose, the document's unassuming and legalistic style may appear surprising. The decisive passage comes only toward the middle, where Lincoln writes, "[O]n the first day of January in the year of our Lord, one thousand eight hundred and sixty-three, 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."

The modest style did not diminish the Proclamation's revolutionary content. "Lincoln is a sui generis figure in the annals of history," Karl Marx observed on October 9, 1862 in *Die Presse*. "The most redoubtable decrees—which will always remain remarkable historical documents—flung by him at the enemy all look like, and are intended to look like, routine summonses sent by a lawyer to the lawyer of the opposing party."

The "preliminary" Emancipation Proclamation, as it is sometimes called, held out the possibility that if the rebelling states returned to the Union during the 100 days between September 22, 1862 and January 1, 1863, and they agreed to a plan for the gradual manumission of slaves, they might be spared expropriation. Lincoln even broached, in this initial version, the possibility that freed slaves be made subject to a plan of colonization "upon this continent, or elsewhere."

Lincoln did not believe that offering these inducements would succeed in bringing the rebel states back into the Union. Their insertion in the document (Lincoln made no mention of colonization schemes in the final Proclamation) was aimed at assuaging the slaveholding border states that had remained in the Union (Missouri, Kentucky, Delaware, West Virginia and Maryland) and a section of voters in the North, where the population was subjected to relentless propaganda by the Democratic Party press and politicians over the "miscegenation" and "servile insurrection" aims of the "Black Republican Party."

Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation as a military

order in his capacity as commander in chief. He invoked his wartime powers to circumvent Democratic Party opposition to emancipation. It was for this reason, as well as the existence of Constitutional provisions sanctioning slavery, that the Proclamation applied only to areas then in rebellion. There was little doubt at the time, however, that the document spelled the doom of slavery. It was, fumed Confederate President Jefferson Davis, an "invitation to the general assassination of ... masters."

In fact, the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution, abolishing slavery in the United States, was passed by both houses of the Republican-controlled Congress before the end of the war and officially enacted in December of 1865.

Lincoln's personal opposition to slavery was well known. He was viewed by friend and enemy alike as an anti-slavery politician—though not an abolitionist. "As I would not be a slave, so I would not be a master. This expresses my idea of democracy," Lincoln had stated.

Yet the Republican Party had won the 1860 election on a platform that promised slavery would not be abolished where it already existed; it would be banned only from new territories. Notwithstanding the Southern elite's violent rejection of this position in the form of secession and war, the Lincoln administration waged the Civil War in 1861-1862 as a struggle to return to the status quo ante.

As late as August 22, 1862, Lincoln published a letter in Horace Greeley's anti-slavery newspaper *The New York Tribune* in which he appeared to reaffirm this position. He famously wrote, "If I could save the Union without freeing any slave, I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing all the slaves, I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone, I would also do that."

Some have singled out these words as evidence that Lincoln bothered himself little over slavery and cared still less for the slaves. They conveniently leave out the letter's closing line: "I have here stated my purpose according to my view of official duty, and I intend no modification of my oft-expressed personal wish that all men, everywhere, could be free."

More importantly, they overlook the fact that Lincoln had already drafted, some two months earlier, the Emancipation Proclamation. Viewed in this light, Lincoln's letter to Greeley takes on a very different meaning. He was now prepared to "save the Union" by "freeing all the slaves," and with his letter he was readying the public for a proclamation that would do just that.

But Lincoln held his Proclamation, waiting for a victory in the

field during the summer of 1862, one of the low points in the Union's long war. Union military setbacks during the war's first year had won Lincoln to the abolitionists' position that it would not be possible to defeat the Confederacy without destroying slavery. "We must free the slaves or ourselves be subdued," Lincoln concluded.

In part, the slaves themselves had forced the issue. This is clear from other stipulations in the Proclamation. Wherever the Union army moved, slaves seized upon its presence to flee. The departure of its labor force threatened the entire Southern economy. So the document forbade Union generals from returning escaped slaves to their masters in rebel territory, thus affirming the earlier Confiscation Acts passed by Congress.

The Emancipation Proclamation altered the military conduct of the war in one other critical way. It coincided with Lincoln's removal and demotion of generals such as George McClellan, who had fought the South in a compromising and even conciliatory manner, and set the stage for the elevation of figures such as Ulysses S. Grant, Philip Sheridan and William Tecumseh Sherman. The difference was striking. McClellan delivered notes to Southern planters stating that they should not fear for their property or slaves; Sherman said his aim was "to make Georgia howl."

The Proclamation had immense international ramifications. Defeat of Lee's army at the Battle of Antietam on September 17 had temporarily averted the danger that Britain or France might intervene on the side of the South. (On the morning of that battle, British Prime Minister Lord Palmerston had delivered a note to his foreign secretary stating that it was time to offer mediation in the conflict "with a view toward recognition of the Confederates," whom the British and French ruling classes wanted to emerge victorious).

But it was the Emancipation Proclamation, finally issued five days after Antietam, that made it all but politically impossible for France or Britain to intervene openly on the side of the South. At the same time, it made the cause of the Union the cause of the European working class.

In England, mass demonstrations were held in support of the Union in spite of the fact that a Union blockade had brought the "Cotton Famine" and mass unemployment in the British mills. At one of these demonstrations a resolution was passed by "The Working People of Manchester" declaring that emancipation "will cause the name of Abraham Lincoln to be honoured and revered by posterity."

Lincoln quickly wrote back, acknowledging "the sufferings which the working people of Manchester and in all Europe are called to endure in this crisis." He thanked "the Workingmen of Manchester" for their "decisive utterance upon the question." The letter was delivered by Charles Francis Adams, ambassador to Britain and grandson of founding father John Adams.

Marx aptly called the Emancipation Proclamation "the most important document in American history since the establishment of the Union." Lincoln himself again and again invoked the founding document of the American republic, the Declaration of Independence, and its revolutionary assertion that "all men are created equal"--most famously in the Gettysburg Address.

The contradiction between these words and the institution of slavery bedeviled the new republic and led ineluctably to the Civil War—the Second American Revolution—and what Lincoln in 1863 called "a new birth of freedom."

The underlying contradiction between the revolutionary democratic conceptions embodied in the Emancipation Proclamation and a socio-economic system based on class exploitation manifested itself rapidly after the end of the Civil War. Just twelve years later, in 1877, the Republican Party agreed to end Reconstruction in the South and hand political power back to the heirs of the old plantation aristocracy. In that same year, Republican and Democratic officials marshaled troops and police to shoot down workers who rose up across the country in the Great Railroad Strike.

The American ruling class has long since trampled on the revolutionary democratic traditions of the American Revolution and Civil War. Today, as it resorts to plunder and repression to increase its wealth and widen the chasm between rich and poor, the bourgeoisie in its greed and insolence bears a striking resemblance to the old slaveholding elite.

To observe the current presidential contest between Obama and Romney is to witness the visceral hatred of the ruling class for equality. Romney, a fabulously wealthy financial parasite, taunts "47 percent" of the population for believing they have a right "to health care, to food, to housing." He attacks Obama for supposedly introducing an entirely novel and foreign notion—"wealth redistribution"—into the American body politic. Obama, who has indeed redistributed trillions of dollars in wealth *upward* from the working class to the financial elite, tacitly disavows any support for redistributive policies that favor the working class and poor.

The claim that "redistribution" from the top to the bottom is alien to American history and culture is as false as it is ignorant. The Emancipation Proclamation announced the largest seizure of private property in world history prior to the Russian Revolution.

The American financial aristocracy dominates both political parties and controls every institution of government. Just like the old Slave Power, it will not voluntarily depart the stage of history. The slaves had to be emancipated to destroy the slaveholding elite. To destroy the power of the financial aristocracy requires first and foremost the political emancipation of the working class.

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