

Abraham Lincoln: Gradual Emancipator

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It has been a convention of American historical memory to position President Abraham Lincoln as the 'Great Emancipator.' This title invokes the Emancipation Proclamation and the notion that Lincoln pursued the wholesale abolition of slavery from the very beginnings of his political career, with the Emancipation Proclamation being the culmination of all his efforts up until its signing into effect on January 1st, 1863. Lincoln, however, while certainly opposed to slavery from as early on as his service in the Illinois House of Representatives, initially sought to pursue gradual abolition. Rather than setting out to be the 'Great Emancipator,' Lincoln's aspiration was that of the 'Gradual Emancipator.' In this paper, I will examine how his views on the subject of slavery developed over time, gradually moving from the policy of gradual abolition until the events of the Civil War led to him penning the Emancipation Proclamation. This approach will allow for a clearer understanding of the transition in Lincoln's thinking on the question of abolition.

There were some important developments that saw shifts – however subtle – in Lincoln's position on slavery. These developments include the debate on the Wilmot Proviso in the U.S. House of Representatives, the introduction of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, and eventually the conduct of black soldiers during the American Civil War. Lincoln's admiration of Henry Clay also influenced his view on what the ideal form of emancipation would be. Nonetheless, Paul Finkelman wrote that there were some consistent foundations to the Gradual Emancipator's position on slavery, even as his arguments became more nuanced in the later years of his political career. Indeed, according to Finkelman, "as a public official, [Lincoln] had always supported limiting slavery in any way that was constitutional and never supported any resolution that sought to justify the morality of the institution."¹ Thus, while never having been a supporter of the institution of slavery, Lincoln had serious reservations toward any abolitionist proposal that might have been unconstitutional in nature.

This view is most clearly reflected in a protest to the Illinois legislature delivered on March 3rd, 1837 and signed by both Abraham Lincoln and Dan Stone. At the time, Lincoln was in the early stages of his political career, serving his first term in the Illinois House of Representatives when the protest was delivered. The text of the March 3rd, 1837 protest sets out how Lincoln and Stone "believe that the Congress of the United States has the power, under the Constitution, to abolish slavery in the District of Columbia; but that that power ought not to be exercised unless at the request of the people of said District."² Thus, Lincoln placed State rights as a paramount concern in the debate over slavery, supporting abolition insofar as it did not infringe upon powers normally assigned to the States. Furthermore, Stone and Lincoln conveyed that "they believe that the institution of slavery

¹ Paul Finkelman, "Lincoln and Emancipation: Constitutional Theory, Practical Politics, and the Basic Practice of Law," *Journal of Supreme Court History* 35, no. 3 (2010): 245.

² Abraham Lincoln, "Protest in Illinois Legislature on Slavery, March 3, 1837," In *Lincoln on Race and Slavery*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 2.

is founded on both injustice and bad policy; but that the promulgation of abolition doctrines tends rather to increase than to abate its evils."³ Essentially, the position held by Lincoln on slavery in 1837 regarded the federal government's role in the abolition of slavery as limited. The measure in the Illinois legislature was clearly intended to express concern about the constitutionality of federal abolitionist policy and submitted that the pursuit of such a policy would do more harm than good for the cause of ending slavery in the United States of America.

Lincoln maintained this position until the later years of his life, viewing the emancipation of slaves and the abolition of slavery as a responsibility of States exclusively. He wrote of his disdain for slavery in his letter to Mary Speed on September 27th, 1841. In that correspondence Lincoln conveyed his disapproval of "perpetual slavery where the lash of the master is proverbially more ruthless and unrelenting than any other where" and expressed human empathy for slaves he had seen on a ship, noting that, "yet amid all these distressing circumstances, as we would think them, they were most cheerful and apparently happy creatures on board."⁴ Even so, Lincoln continued to express reluctance to support a form of 'top down' abolitionism from the federal government. In 1845, he wrote to Williamson Durley, "I think annexation an evil. I hold it to be a paramount duty of us in the free states, due to the union of the states, and perhaps to liberty itself...to let the slavery of the other states alone."⁵

It is important to note, though, that there are some indications of a transition for Lincoln to a stance of gradual emancipation in 1845. In the aforementioned letter to Williamson Durley, Lincoln further wrote, "we should never knowingly lend ourselves directly or indirectly, to prevent that slavery from dying a natural death."⁶ While there remains no envisioned role for the federal government in the emancipation of slaves and the abolition of slavery, Lincoln here entertained the notion that gradual emancipation should be, and inevitably would be, promulgated by the States themselves. He saw slavery as a dying institution, its end being only a matter of time. Here, the argument Lincoln adopted, was not so much couched in the language of State rights as some of his previous remarks or as in his protest to the Illinois legislature in 1837. Rather, he took the view that actively pursuing abolition in the South was an unnecessary measure.

Abraham Lincoln's two years of service in the U.S. House of Representatives during 1847-1849 appear to have been a turning point in his position on emancipation, prompting him to support a more engaged approach from the federal government and the Northern States. In the midst of the Mexican-American War, Lincoln repeatedly voted and argued in favour of various iterations of the Wilmot Proviso, "which provided that slavery should be forever prohibited in all the territory to be acquired from Mexico."⁷ The staunch opposition of this measure by Congressmen from the South may have left Lincoln with the impression that, rather than being a dying institution, slavery was reinvigorated in the South to such an

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Abraham Lincoln, "Letter to Mary Speed, September 27, 1841," in *Lincoln on Race and Slavery*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 10.

⁵ Abraham Lincoln, "Letter to Williamson Durley, October 3, 1845," in *Lincoln on Race and Slavery*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 19.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ James F. Rhodes, *History of the United States, from the Compromise of 1850 to the McKinley - Bryan Campaign of 1896*, vol. 1 (New York: Cosimo, 2009), 89 - 90.

extent that these States' representatives were desiring to see its spread to the territories that later became the States of Texas, New Mexico, and California. This revelation, which Lincoln witnessed firsthand in the U.S. House of Representatives, led him to support a more vigilant and intensive approach to countering the spread of slavery beyond the Southern States. Nonetheless, he still did not yet support any kind of intervention by the federal government into these States, instead conveying a continued belief in the potential for gradual emancipation facilitated by the public of the respective States themselves.

According to Lucas E. Morel, "Lincoln wanted both human equality and government by consent of the governed. He believed justice required both, and so he was devoted to the principles of the Declaration of Independence as well as the practice of self-government as manifested in the Constitution and the rule of law."⁸ Therefore, after concluding his only term in Congress, Lincoln returned to Illinois to work in his law practice but continued to raise public awareness in the Northern States of the continued practice of slavery elsewhere in the United States of America. With the emergence of the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854, Lincoln perceived another attempt by the South to spread slavery. Under the Act, settlers from the South to the newly-created territories of Kansas and Nebraska could have determined whether to allow the ownership of slaves in those same territories. In a speech delivered in Peoria, Illinois on October 16th, 1854, Lincoln enumerated his objections to the Act and to the attempted spread of slavery by the South.

At Peoria, Lincoln gave voice to his suspicions about the motivation behind the Kansas-Nebraska Act, stating that, "this declared indifference, but as I must think, covert real zeal for the spread of slavery, I can not but hate. I hate it because of the monstrous injustice of slavery itself. I hate it because it deprives our republican example of its just influence in the world."⁹ As such, the audience was encouraged to despise the Kansas-Nebraska Act with the same fervour as Lincoln. He stopped short, however, of enjoining the audience to condemn the practice of slavery in the South, instead expressing his sustained conviction that gradual emancipation would eventually be realized in those States:

the great majority, South as well as North, have human sympathies, of which they can no more divest themselves than they can of their sensibility to physical pain. These sympathies in the bosoms of the Southern people manifest in many ways, their sense of the wrong of slavery, and their consciousness that, after all, there is humanity in the Negro.¹⁰

If Lincoln's experiences with the Wilmot Proviso and the Kansas-Nebraska Act influenced his perception of the South, then it is also necessary to briefly examine the influences on Lincoln's view of the black community in the United States prior to his ascension to the presidency. Indeed, rather than viewing slaves as deserving full access to the rights afforded to citizens of the United States of America, Lincoln began to consider the policy of

⁸ Lucas E. Morel, "Lincoln and the Constitution: A Unionist for the Sake of Liberty," *Journal of Supreme Court History* 35, no. 3 (2010): 215.

⁹ Abraham Lincoln, "Speech at Peoria, Illinois, October 16, 1854," In *The Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln and American Slavery*, ed. Eric Foner (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010), 66.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*.

'colonization' as a solution that would balance the cause of abolition with political concerns about a possible 'race war' in the South. Abraham Lincoln's association with Henry Clay was a crucial factor in his interest toward colonization. Clay had served in public office for many years before Lincoln won a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives, placing Henry Clay as a kind of mentor for the young Congressman from Illinois. In fact, as Edgar Jones writes, "Henry Clay was the idol of Abraham Lincoln's youth and manhood."¹¹

So significant was Lincoln's regard for Clay that he delivered a eulogy on Henry Clay's passing on July 6th, 1852. Importantly, Lincoln referred to Clay's support for colonization in that eulogy, indicating that one of the aspects with which he most associated Clay was his support for a policy of colonization. He wrote:

if as the friends of colonization hope, the present and coming generations of our countrymen shall by any means succeed in freeing our land from the dangerous presence of slavery; and, at the time, in restoring a captive people to their long-lost fatherland, with bright prospects for the future; and this too, so gradually, that neither races nor individuals shall have suffered by the change.¹²

This colonization entailed the voluntary repatriation of freed slaves to some territory in Africa. Lincoln expanded upon this, considering other alternative destinations for these freed slaves. As he told representatives of the Border States during his presidency on July 12th, 1862, "I do not speak of emancipation at once, but of a decision at once to emancipate gradually. Room in South America for colonization, can be obtained cheaply, and in abundance."¹³

The impression Henry Clay made upon Abraham Lincoln's thinking was clearly not limited to his youth or to his years in the U.S. House of Representatives. According to Fornieri, "Clay's western roots, economic nationalism, devotion to the union, principled opposition to the extension of slavery, and his colonization plan for dealing with the problem of slavery made a lasting impression on the young Lincoln."¹⁴ Even in the time following the issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation, this measure was for many at the time overshadowed by his declared support for a policy of colonization. It was regarded with some suspicion as, "even after the Emancipation Proclamation, Northern blacks believed that Lincoln remained a colonizationist and would do nothing to advance their claims to full citizenship."¹⁵ Public figures, such as Frederick Douglass, who otherwise were allies of Lincoln's in his later struggles to abolish slavery throughout the United States were also irked by his support for colonization. On this very issue, according to James

¹¹ Edgar Jones, *The Influence of Henry Clay upon Abraham Lincoln* (Lexington, Kentucky: Henry Clay Memorial Foundation, 1952), 1.

¹² Abraham Lincoln, "Eulogy on Henry Clay Delivered in the State House At Springfield, Illinois, July 6, 1852," in *Language of Liberty: The Political Speeches and Writings of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Joseph R. Fornieri (Washington D.C: Regnery Publishing, 2003), 139.

¹³ Abraham Lincoln, "To Border State Representatives, July 12, 1862," in *Lincoln on Race and Slavery*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 233 - 234.

¹⁴ Fornieri, *The Language of Liberty*, 128.

¹⁵ Gates Jr., *Lincoln on Race and Slavery*, 236.

McPherson, "Frederick Douglass accused Lincoln of 'contempt for negroes' and 'canting hypocrisy'."¹⁶

With such extensive pressure from some quarters to abandon any ideas of colonization, one might have assumed that Lincoln would repudiate his earlier thinking on the subject. But the impression made by Henry Clay upon Lincoln had been strong and he continued to see colonization as the best means by which the concerns of the South and the North could be balanced. Lincoln believed it would facilitate the emancipation of slaves but simultaneously reduce the risk of the 'race war' that some in the South feared. It would have also secured greater loyalty from white communities in Kentucky and the Border States, the territories that held the strategic balance in the Civil War and where many hoped in later years that the Union would be more effective at preserving slavery than the Confederacy.¹⁷ After issuing the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, "Lincoln still retained an interest in colonization. But he would never again publicly advocate this policy."¹⁸

Examining the years of Lincoln's life prior to assuming the presidency, it is possible to discern two developments that fostered transitions in his thinking as well as two constants. The two constants were Lincoln's abhorrence for the institution of slavery and his keen interest in colonization. Meanwhile, the two developments were, as was previously discussed, the resistance of Congressmen from the South to the Wilmot Proviso and the advent of the Kansas-Nebraska Act. In some respects, the influences of the two developments and the two constants in Lincoln's pre-presidency stance on abolition were in stark opposition to each other. On the one hand, Lincoln viewed the ideal model for abolition as taking place at a gradual pace and with as little interference from the federal government as possible. States would be left to abolish slavery at their own pace and as a result of debates coming from within their own corresponding societies. Even then, 'whites' and 'blacks' would need not live together and join as one citizenry, since freed slaves would be repatriated to some territory in either Africa or South America.

But, even as Lincoln expounded the virtues of colonization and expressed faith in what constituted his ideal scenario, the aforementioned two developments cast doubt on the likelihood that the same scenario could be realized. Rather than receding, slavery seemed at the time to be expanding. The South had resisted the Wilmot Proviso, seeming to indicate their desire to see slavery introduced in what would become the States of Texas, New Mexico, and California. The Kansas-Nebraska Act, which also allowed for the introduction of slavery into Kansas and Nebraska, had been introduced by Stephen A. Douglas, a Senator hailing from Illinois. Subsequent court decisions, such as the Dred Scott case in 1857, further legitimized the spread of slavery to new territories on the basis that Dred Scott and other slaves were legally regarded as property.¹⁹ This contrast between the ideals Lincoln held and the realities surrounding him in the years prior to his presidency set the stage for the decision in his later years to produce the Emancipation Proclamation.

Still, Lincoln did not assume the presidency with a desire to seek vengeance upon the South for their perceived agenda of spreading slavery, nor did he spontaneously

¹⁶ James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 509.

¹⁷ Anne E. Marshall, *Creating A Confederate Kentucky: The Lost Cause and Civil War Memory in a Border State* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina, 2010), 10.

¹⁸ Foner, *The Fiery Trial*, 244.

¹⁹ George Anastaplo, *Abraham Lincoln: A Constitutional Biography* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2001), 159.

transform into the 'Great Emancipator' upon taking office. Even in the midst of the Civil War, Lincoln sought gradual emancipation, albeit in a more aggressive format than he had previously proposed. It is possible that Lincoln had to moderate his position on abolition during the Civil War as a result of the political realities of the North. For example, "the fear of a northward migration of slaves seeking liberty was what also caused many high-minded Northerners to oppose emancipation while supporting the war."²⁰ With Northerners fearing a flood of refugees from the South, support for comprehensive measures to liberate slaves in the South were somewhat lacking, necessitating a more balanced position from Lincoln to secure re-election.

At the same time, though, it must be noted that pressure from more radical abolitionists in the North as well as from abroad was mounting during the Civil War. As some expected a moderate approach to emancipation, others demanded that decisive action be taken. For example, one wrote for *London Times* wrote in late 1862 that:

where he has no power Mr. Lincoln will set the negroes free; where he retains power he will consider them as slaves. This is more like a Chinaman banging his two swords together to frighten an enemy than like an earnest man pressing forward his cause.²¹

Aside from the racist attitude reflected in these remarks, encapsulated in their derogatory stereotype of a 'Chinaman', the *London Times* called upon Lincoln to take comprehensive action to effect the emancipation of slaves in the South. Closer to home than the British press, Frederick Douglass heaped criticism on Lincoln and the Union as early as May 1861, writing in his own publication, "to fight against slaveholders, without fighting against slavery, is but a half-hearted business, and paralyzes the hands engaged in it [...] fire must be met with water [...] war for the destruction of liberty must be met with war for the destruction of slavery."²²

In early 1862, Lincoln was also faced with debate in the District of Columbia over the abolition of slavery there and the emancipation of slaves located within its borders – a debate similar to the one which he had commented on during his first term in the Illinois House of Representatives roughly 25 years prior. In 1837, he had urged caution, gradualism, and an approach that would not contravene the terms of the Constitution. Once again, in 1862, he declared, "I am a little uneasy about the abolishment of slavery in this District, not but I would be glad to see it abolished, but as to the time and manner of doing it."²³ Eventually, the District of Columbia opted for compensated emancipation but the debate placed further pressure upon Lincoln to reconsider his preference for a balanced and gradual approach to issues concerning the emancipation of slaves.

Amid competing pressures from both at home and abroad, Lincoln found his way to producing the Emancipation Proclamation. "As a gradualist who hoped to end slavery without social dislocation and with the voluntary cooperation of slave owners," argues

²⁰ John Keegan, *The American Civil War: A Military History* (New York: Vintage Books, 2009), 169 – 170.

²¹ *London Times*, October 7, 1862.

²² Frederick Douglass, *Douglass' Monthly*, May 1861.

²³ Abraham Lincoln, "Letter to Horace Greeley, March 24, 1862," in *Lincoln on Race and Slavery*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 229.

McPherson, "Lincoln in 1862 thought he saw an opening in the mounting pressures against the institution."²⁴ The South, in the view of Lincoln and many in the North, had engaged in open rebellion against the lawful government of the United States of America by this point. This created an opportunity whereby the perceived efforts of the South to spread the institution of slavery could be countered, but the concerns of the North about the fallout of immediate emancipation could at the same time be offset. Historian Susan Schulten writes, "in July of 1862, Lincoln revealed his plan for emancipation to his cabinet, which advised him to wait until a more politically opportune moment to take such dramatic action."²⁵ It was not until January 1863 that this moment finally arrived.

Lincoln made use of the intervening time between his proposal to his cabinet and the eventual issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation to attempt a more moderate compromise. He sought to develop some level of support in the Border States for compensated emancipation, which would have seen slave owners receiving either monetary compensation from the federal government for freeing their slaves or a period of labour under which a freed slave would render an 'apprenticeship' in service to his or her slave owner. In 1862, "through the fall, Lincoln continued to lobby privately for both compensated emancipation and colonization, neither of which ever gained substantial support. He made the case for these two measures publicly in his Annual Message to Congress in December 1862."²⁶ In order to provide some means for the implementation of a colonization policy, Lincoln arranged for a \$600,000 colonization fund out of the \$60 million budget approved by Congress that year.²⁷

When the opportunity arrived for the Emancipation Proclamation to be issued, Lincoln couched this measure in the language of military necessity, linking the emancipation of slaves and the abolition of slavery to the survival of the Union and victory in the Civil War. Some in Lincoln's cabinet, including Simon Cameron, the Secretary of War, had already paved the way for this measure in previous years. In late 1861, he wrote of his conviction that "those who make war against the Government justly forfeit all rights of property [...] it is as clearly a right of the Government to arm slaves, when it may become necessary, as it is to use gun-powder taken from the enemy."²⁸ Here, in the Secretary's own words, was the crux of the argument in favour of the Emancipation Proclamation; the South had made such action necessary, and emancipation was strictly a military measure intended to turn the tide in the North's favour.

For those who later styled Lincoln the 'Great Emancipator', this document was indicative of his broad vision of emancipation, but it fell short of sanctioning the total and immediate abolition of slavery. Rather, the terms of the Proclamation further reinforced the notion of Lincoln as the 'Gradual Emancipator'. As Eric Foner points out, "the Proclamation had no bearing on the nearly half-million slaves in the four border states and

²⁴ McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 498.

²⁵ Susan Schulten, "The Cartography of Slavery and the Authority of Statistics," *Civil War History*, vol. 56, no. 1 (March 2010): 26.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Phillip W. Magness and Sebastian N. Page, *Colonization After Emancipation: Lincoln and the Movement for Black Resettlement* (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 2011), 4.

²⁸ John G. Nicolay and John M. Hay, *Abraham Lincoln: A History* (New York: The Century Company, 1890), 125 – 126.

West Virginia."²⁹ Doris Goodwin adds that Lincoln "knew that any hint of total, direct emancipation would alienate the Border States, whose continued loyalty was essential for victory, and would shatter the Republicans' fragile alliance with Northern Democrats."³⁰ As the Proclamation had no effect on slaves in the Border States, it also was confined in its language to legal concerns surrounding emancipation. Foner writes, "some abolitionists and Radicals lamented the absence of any moral statement against slavery in the document."³¹

The result, however, was that freed slaves now could serve the North in a military capacity during and following the Civil War, an important step toward securing equal status for the black community in the United States in later years. As indicated in Simon Cameron's remarks in 1861, the decision to allow blacks to serve in the military was not the result of an epiphany, nor was it a long-held agenda of Lincoln's. But, according to McPherson, "the idea of black soldiers did not, of course, spring full-blown from Lincoln's head at the time of the emancipation proclamation. The notion had been around since the beginning of the war, when Northern blacks in several cities had volunteered for the Union army."³² It nonetheless vindicated the beliefs of abolitionists and also made an impression upon Lincoln about role freed slaves and their descendants could play in American society. The recruitment policy "in the North, where ex-slaves in tens of thousands had been enlisted since the Emancipation of January 1863, proved the blacks made brave and efficient soldiers, which proved that the whole point of slavery was indeed wrong."³³

It could be said then that there were three developments of importance that influenced Lincoln's perspective on abolition after he assumed the presidency. Much as the Wilmot Proviso and the Kansas-Nebraska Act made Lincoln increasingly wary of the South, these three developments brought about shifts in Lincoln's view of what measures would be necessary to effect the abolition of slavery. These developments also affected his perception of blacks as a community. These three developments discerned in this examination are the rebellion of the South and the formation of the Confederate States of America, the Battle of Antietam, and the service rendered by black soldiers.

In the case of the first development, the secession of Southern States and their efforts to persuade the Border States to join them was further indication to Lincoln of the South's intentions to reinvigorate and expand the slave trade, rather than to accept its anticipated extinction. Under such circumstances, leaving the decision to abolish slavery to individual States became exceedingly difficult and a more aggressive policy became apparently necessary. Meanwhile, "the battle [of Antietam] also altered for good the moral atmosphere of the war, by providing Lincoln with the opportunity to proclaim large-scale emancipation of the South's slave population, a measure long desired by the president himself and millions of his fellow countrymen."³⁴ While the Battle of Antietam itself might not have had the direct effect of facilitating the Emancipation Proclamation, the conflict

²⁹ Foner, *The Fiery Trial*, 241.

³⁰ Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2005), 369 – 370.

³¹ Foner, *The Fiery Trial*, 232.

³² McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 563.

³³ Keegan, *The American Civil War: A Military History*, 293.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 169.

was the culmination of a series of events that set the stage for the issuance of the Proclamation a short few months later.

Finally, the conduct of black soldiers evidently had some influence on Lincoln's views in the final years of his life. Even as he had mounted a lifelong campaign in opposition to slavery, Lincoln had not generally supported a place for blacks in American society as equal citizens. As previously mentioned, he had argued in favour of colonization for many years. In an address delivered in Chicago on August 14th, 1862, Lincoln remarked that, "you and we are different races. We have between us a broader difference than exists between almost any other two races. Whether it is right or wrong I need not discuss, but this physical difference is a great disadvantage to us both, as I think your race suffers very greatly, many of them by living among us, while ours suffer from your presence."³⁵ Clearly, in referring to differences between the races and connecting these differences with suffering, Lincoln envisioned no place for blacks among the American citizenry once the Civil War was concluded and slavery abolished.

Later, however, Lincoln asserted the moral condemnation of slavery that so many had lamented to be missing from the Emancipation Proclamation. In a letter to Albert G. Hodges, a prominent figure in Kentucky at the time, Lincoln wrote, "I am naturally anti-slavery. If slavery is not wrong, nothing is wrong. I can not remember when I did not so think and feel."³⁶ Whether Lincoln had begun to see a place for blacks as equal citizens as the Civil War drew to a close is mostly speculative. But the capacity for black soldiers to serve as admirably and professionally as white soldiers created something of a precedent. If blacks could maintain professional conduct in warfare, it would not be a significant leap in logic to argue that blacks could also become informed voters in an election as readily as whites, were they to be afforded equal opportunity to receive an education and access to other such tools for social advancement.³⁷

The conduct of these black soldiers may have also persuaded white soldiers of the moral case for emancipation. McPherson notes that two-fifths of Union soldiers came from a Democratic background, a party principally opposed to emancipation, and another one-fifth was drawn from the pro-slavery Border States.³⁸ The Union military suffered from severely low morale in the winter of 1862-1863, in part because of a belief among the ranks that Lincoln had changed the purpose of the Civil War from preserving the Union to imposing the abolition of slavery.³⁹ Morale only recovered as the Union scored more hard-fought victories in the Civil War, in part because of the contributions of emancipated slaves and black soldiers to the war effort. In fact, by the end of the conflict, approximately 190,000 black soldiers and sailors had served in the Union military, providing a crucial advantage to the Northern States.⁴⁰

³⁵ Abraham Lincoln, "Address on Colonization, Chicago, Illinois, August 14, 1862," in *Lincoln on Race and Slavery*, 236.

³⁶ Abraham Lincoln, "Letter to Albert G. Hodges, April 18, 1864," in *Lincoln on Race and Slavery*, 299.

³⁷ Gates, *Lincoln on Race and Slavery*, 316.

³⁸ James M. McPherson, *For Cause & Comrades: Why Men Fought In The Civil War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 121.

³⁹ James M. McPherson, "Who Freed the Slaves?" *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 139, no. 1 (March 1995): 7.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 1.

As has been demonstrated here, Lincoln's views on the abolition of slavery developed considerably over the course of his life. Much of the time, he argued for the federal government to have no role whatsoever in abolition, instead placing the responsibility for abolition exclusively with the individual States. Later, he sought to persuade States retaining slavery to accept abolition through various incentives, such as compensated emancipation and colonization. Finally, in the throes of Civil War and facing pressure from at home and abroad, Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation; but even this historic measure advocated only gradual emancipation, made no provision for slaves in the Border States, and advocated for this emancipation on the basis of military necessity alone. In 1863, Lincoln remained the 'Gradual Emancipator' he had been since first taking public office in 1837. The transformation into the 'Great Emancipator' was made only after his assassination.

Reflecting on Lincoln's struggle to strike a balance between the competing forces at play in the United States of America during his lifetime, it is clear that he was not quick to change his views and relentlessly pursued compromise. As he wrote in another letter in 1862, "I shall adopt new views as fast as they shall appear to be true views."⁴¹ If Lincoln adopted new views on the appropriate means by which the abolition of slavery could be achieved, it was only through the combined influences of several developments and two constants during his lifetime, which we have outlined and discussed previously. Prior to assuming the presidency, the two developments that most influenced Lincoln were the South's opposition to the Wilmot Proviso and the South's support for the Kansas-Nebraska Act, both of which demonstrated the lingering vitality of the slave trade in the South and the regional agenda to spread slavery beyond their States. After assuming the presidency, three more developments served to build Lincoln's motivation to pursue emancipation and re-consider his previous support for colonization: the secession of the South and the attempt by those States to recruit the Border States, the Battle of Antietam, and the conduct of black soldiers during the Civil War. Amidst all of this, the two constants that both motivated and moderated Lincoln's thinking were his disdain for the institution of slavery and his interest in colonization inspired by Henry Clay.

Taken together, it may seem difficult to reconcile Lincoln's actions with the varied nature of these influences to which he was exposed throughout his life. However, it is clear that each separate element had its own role in fostering a transition in Lincoln's perspective at crucial points in his public career, from the Illinois House of Representatives to the White House in Washington, DC. The image of the 'Great Emancipator' is romanticized, the apotheosis of a political leader in a time of great difficulty for the United States of America. However, the reality of the 'Gradual Emancipator' is no less inspiring and underscores the complexity of the issues President Abraham Lincoln faced as he struggled to end slavery, an institution he so strongly and so consistently opposed.

⁴¹ Abraham Lincoln, "Letter to Horace Greeley, August 22, 1862," in *Lincoln on Race and Slavery*, 243.

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