

A NATION DIVIDED

The American Civil War

CHANGING COURSE

Emancipation Proclamation
redefined goal of Civil War

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While the American Civil War was sparked primarily by passionate disagreement over slavery, the subject of human chattel and the prospect of ending slavery rarely came up during the first year of the war. Instead, most southerners spoke of their desire to defend their way of life and their homes while northerners talked about the importance of preserving the Union. For abolitionists who hoped the war would cleanse America of human bondage, the early months of the war were bitterly disappointing as slavery continued.

Lincoln thought slavery was morally wrong and had said so many times during his presidential campaign. However, in his First Inaugural Address, he pledged to leave slavery alone in the Southern states in hopes of avoiding war. Additionally, the intense racism against blacks in the North as well as the South made emancipation unpopular with many who wanted to maintain clear separation between the races. Lincoln was afraid of losing support if he made abolition the main purpose of the war.

In the end, the futility of fighting the Civil War without ending slavery became clear. If the war had ended with slavery intact, the issue that



Black troops such as the Provost Guard of the 107th Colored Infantry (pictured above) proved to be a valuable addition to the Union war effort. Abolitionist Frederick Douglass was a persistent advocate of allowing blacks to serve, arguing that liberty won for blacks only by white men would lose half its luster. National Archives

had caused it would still be present. Furthermore, foreign nations were considering recognizing the Confederacy as a new nation and perhaps offering aid. By freeing the slaves, Lincoln could change the goals of the war and make the Union look good in the eyes of the British and French who had abolished slavery in their nations much earlier.

Emancipation would give the Union a great cause to fight for and would encourage slaves in the South to flee, depriving their masters of their labor. It would also open the way for the Union to use

black troops. Morally, it was simply the right thing to do. Unable to avoid the issue any longer, Lincoln made his decision in the summer of 1862 and awaited a Union victory on the battlefield to announce it.

The Battle of Antietam in September gave him his chance. Lincoln issued

the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation on September 22, followed by the real Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863. The document declared that slaves in the rebellious Southern states were free, but left slavery alone in the Border States for the immediate future.

The Emancipation Proclamation was a turning point in the Civil War because it made the ending of slavery an official goal. It did not, however free any slaves immediately. The process of emancipation took time, and as the Union army advanced and took control of the Confederacy, slaves gradually began to leave the ranks of forced labor.



Abraham Lincoln, surrounded by members of his Cabinet, at the first reading of the Emancipation Proclamation. Painted by F.B. Carpenter and engraved by A.H. Ritchie. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division

Black troops enter army

Lincoln's proclamation also accepted black men into the Union army. Despite the fact that black troops faced discrimination, such as having to serve under only white officers, many free blacks and ex-slaves flocked to the army to do their part for the cause. An estimated 186,000 black men served in the Union Army during the Civil War, and some regiments drew attention for their valuable performances.

The final step for emancipation was to make it the law. Some argued that Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation might apply only as an act of war and wondered what would happen when the war ended.

The question was settled on Dec. 6, 1865, when the 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution was ratified. This amendment made slavery permanently illegal within the United States. Although it took time to become an official war goal, emancipation became a proud legacy of the Civil War.

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1854

The Kansas-Nebraska Act leads to the "Bleeding Kansas" border war and the formation of the Republican Party.

1859

John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry increases tensions between the North and the South.

1860

Abraham Lincoln is elected President. South Carolina secedes from the Union.

1861

The Confederate States of America is formed. Fort Sumter is captured and the Civil War begins.

1862

Missouri is successfully defended by the Union at Pea Ridge, Ark. Union victory at Antietam leads Lincoln to issue the Emancipation Proclamation.

1863

Victories at Gettysburg and Vicksburg turn the war in favor of the Union.

1865

Lee surrenders at Appomattox. Lincoln is assassinated at Ford's Theater.

1867

Radical Reconstruction begins in the South.

1877

The Compromise of 1877 ends Reconstruction. Without military support, Reconstruction governments collapse in the South.

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