

# The Family Heritage Series

A weekly discussion of Americanist truths and traditions for those "heirs of all the ages" who will have to preserve that most important inheritance of all — freedom. Produced by the Movement To Restore Decency.



Volume II

Lesson Sixty-Seven

## The Emancipation Proclamation

### LESSON IDEA

To explain why the Emancipation Proclamation was issued and the effect it had; and to demonstrate that it was issued for political, not ideological, reasons.

### PREPARATION

Have a map of the world on hand to locate Haiti and Liberia. Read "During The Week" and plan to adapt the project suggested to the particular needs of your family.

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“I HAVE NO PURPOSE, directly or indirectly, to interfere with the institution of slavery in the States where it exists,” said Abraham Lincoln, Republican candidate for the United States Senate in 1858. “I believe I have no lawful right to do so, and I have no inclination to do so.” It was a statement which he made often in the political debates with Stephen Douglas; it was an assurance which he gave the Southern people in his First Inaugural Address as President of the United States in 1861.

Yet, within eighteen months after assuming the highest office in the land, he issued a sweeping proclamation that not only *interfered* with slavery in the states where it existed, but seriously crippled the South militarily and economically. And it is clear this was the intended purpose. Does this turnabout mean Lincoln was a political charlatan? A devious politician who promises one thing as a candidate and does the opposite as an officeholder? No. But it *does* mean that the Emancipation Proclamation is one of the most misunderstood documents of all time.

In those tempestuous months between Lincoln's election and his issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation, a political hurricane had swept the nation. Eleven states had seceded, forming the Confederate States of America; armies had been organized in both the North and the South; ships were built; coastal blockades were established; and battles were being fought. But the North had yet to win a decisive victory.

There was a strong possibility that the European nations, especially England (which depended on cotton imports from the Southern states), would recognize the Confederacy as a separate and independent nation, throwing the full support of her navy and her treasury into the fight — as France had done on behalf of the thirteen American colonies during the War for Independence. The American Minister to Spain, Carl Schurz, had already made a special trip to Washington to warn Lincoln about European interference. The only hope of thwarting it, he advised, was to free the slaves. Such an act would not only give the entire conflict the coloring of a moral crusade for human rights and win the support of European intellectuals, but it would also deprive the South of its labor force. It would mean leaving cotton to rot in the fields, thereby destroying the business partnership between Southern producers and European purchasers. It could also be argued that the same labor force that harvested cotton produced food, clothing, and weapons for the Confederate Army, and that freeing the slaves was a military tactic designed to weaken the war-making power of the seceding states. What do you think of this line of reasoning? [Encourage

*family discussion on the moral issues involved.]*

According to biographer Ida M. Tarbell: "Lincoln understood clearly how strong a weapon against the South the arming and emancipating of the slaves might be, but he did not want to use it. Throughout his entire political life he had disclaimed any desire to meddle with slavery in the States where the Constitution recognized it. He had undertaken the war not to free men but to preserve the Union. Moreover he feared that the least interference with slavery would drive from him those States lying between the North and South [Kentucky, Missouri, and Maryland] which believed in the institution and yet were for the Union. Already they had given him much substantial aid. He hoped to win them entirely to the North. Emancipation would surely make that hope vain . . . . The plan upon which he finally settled was a simple and just, though impracticable one — he would ask Congress to set aside money gradually to buy and free the negroes in those States that could be persuaded to give up the institution of slavery. Having freed the slaves, he proposed that Congress should colonize them in territory bought for the purpose."

On March 6, 1861, Lincoln presented this compensated-emancipation proposal to Congress and waited for the reaction of the three Border States. There was only a respectful silence. But Congress passed several acts on the strength of the President's proposal. The most significant of these freed all slaves in the District of Columbia and appropriated one million dollars to pay the owners for their loss, setting aside \$100,000 to pay the expenses of any Negroes who wished to emigrate to Haiti or Liberia. [*Locate these two countries on a map.*]

**O**N July 12, Lincoln summoned the representatives of the Border States to the White House and made an earnest, almost passionate, appeal to them to consider his proposition of March 6. "I intend no reproach or complaint," he said, "when I assure you that, in my opinion, if you all had voted for the resolution in the gradual-emancipation message of last March, the war would now be substantially ended. And the plan therein proposed is yet one of the most potent and swift means of ending it. Let the States which are in rebellion see definitely and certainly that in no event will the States you

represent ever join their proposed confederacy, and they cannot much longer maintain the contest. But you cannot divest them of their hope to ultimately have you with them so long as you show a determination to perpetuate the institution [*of slavery*] within your own States."

The majority of the Border States' representatives rejected the President's appeal, and it was then that he began to consider a proclamation freeing all the slaves in the seceding states. After weighing the issue carefully, he called a Cabinet meeting on July 22 to tell his advisers he had "resolved upon this step" and had called them together, not to ask for their opinions but to read the proclamation he had drafted and ask for their suggestions. The target date was to be January 1, 1863. To soften the blow and offer an enticement to the Confederacy, Lincoln proposed giving financial aid to any state which by that time had adopted "gradual abolishment of slavery."

The only serious objection was voiced by Secretary of State William Seward, who felt that the timing of such an announcement was poor, the North being the loser in practically every battle fought up to that date. Any proclamation, he argued, made by a President who was Commander-in-Chief of a retreating army would be meaningless, since the force to back the decree was lacking. Can you see the logic of this argument? [*Encourage discussion. Point out that in any conflict, the weaker force is in no position to make demands on the stronger.*]

"I suggest, sir," said Seward, "that you postpone its issue, until you can give it to the country, supported by military success; instead of issuing it, as would be the case now, upon the greatest disasters of the war!"

Lincoln later explained: "The wisdom of the view of the Secretary of State struck me with very great

#### FOR SERIOUS STUDENTS

We recommend reading *The Life Of Abraham Lincoln* by Ida M. Tarbell (originally published in 1895) for more of the background of the Emancipation Proclamation and the War Between the States. Of special interest are Lincoln's patient prodding of General McClellan, his military advice and diplomacy, and his unique way of debating an issue with himself.

