
Should Lincoln Really Be Recognized As The Great Emancipator?

Abraham Lincoln today is recognized by many as being the “Great Emancipator” who had memorably freed the slaves and saved the Union. However, Lincoln’s actions might not truly be as whole-hearted and heroic as many people are misinformed to believe. Lincoln’s only purpose from the very beginning was to preserve the Union, regardless of whether slaves in the end were freed or kept enslaved. Lincoln, undoubtedly, contributed much towards uniting the country in a time of bloodshed and divisive conflict, but towards the subject of ending slavery, he is not quite deemed the hero with modern sensibilities that people often assume. Although Abraham Lincoln certainly contributed a lot to save the Union and in name only, can be considered to have freed the slaves; however, in a more physical aspect, Lincoln’s initial intentions in freeing them were not as pure as many believed to be but was instead a political and strategical move in bringing the Union back together and ending the Civil War.

There is no doubt in Lincoln’s mind that preserving the Union was his priority, but his true motives in freeing the slaves are questionable. In Lincoln’s famous letter to Horace Greeley, he wrote “my paramount object in this struggle is to save the Union, and it is not either to save or destroy slavery, 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” (Lincoln). His statement to Greeley ultimately shows his true intentions and his stance on slavery. Although some can argue that Lincoln opposed slavery; however, his true intentions were not necessarily to free slaves and therefore, does not necessarily deem him worthy of being recognized as the “Great Emancipator” (Lecture 20). In fact, his actions in eventually declaring them free was merely a political move against the Confederacy. Lincoln freed the slaves for interests that had more to do with military and economic power for preserving the Union rather than for morals or ethics.

As the Civil War was reaching its peak, slavery in the South started to become an even bigger problem for the North as slaves were the major source of labor in the South and were an important asset especially during a time of war (Lecture 19). The South’s main source of economy was through slavery which gave them a huge benefit in the war effort (LEP 15.6). When the North began to lose, Lincoln decided to take initiative against slavery in order to weaken the labor force of the South. Lincoln’s main goal was to save the Union and freeing the slaves was the only way to do it; he would not have paid much attention to the topic so much if it had not been so important to save the nation. The Emancipation Proclamation freed the slaves only on paper, and it was considered more of a war tactic than a moral move. Freeing the slaves was just a means to an end towards Lincoln’s true goal.

Many people associate the Emancipation Proclamation as an executive order that ended slavery; however, the proclamation did not necessarily free the slaves directly. The Emancipation Proclamation was more of a propaganda that Lincoln used on the Confederates to bring the Union back together. Towards the issue of freeing slaves, Lincoln’s motives and strategies are similar to that of a politician than that of a “Great Emancipator.” At the time, Lincoln was not ready to abolish slavery in the South, nor was he ready to take too extreme of a measure on the subject of slavery. Like any good politician, they rarely ever lean-to extreme

measures on a controversial issue for fear of losing popularity on the other side; for Lincoln, he remained neutral on the topic which was the clever political move on his part. A presidential attack on slavery would cause controversy in the north over war goals, create further want for secession in the South, and force the South to turn against him even more, making restoration of the Union harder for Lincoln to achieve. (LEP 16.1). In the political aspect, Lincoln's choice of not taking a side on slavery was a smart political move that most good politicians would have made. The Emancipation Proclamation was used as a military policy to undermine the South while providing a new workforce of freed slaves for the North. Because of the proclamation, it would give more power to the North while leaving the South in a vulnerable economic position since their economy was primarily based on exports produced by slave labor. Lincoln knew this was the best strategy in recapturing and forcing the South to rejoin the Union. In addition, the passing of the 13th amendment was more of a power move that further forced the nation together rather than a strategy to free the slaves.

In name only, Lincoln could be considered to have freed the slaves; however, looking at it in a more physical stance, it was the slaves that really emancipated themselves for it was slaves themselves that ran away from the South seeking protection from the Union army (LEP 16-3). It can even be questioned if the Emancipation Proclamation actually free the slaves as the declaration was merely propaganda in getting the South to rejoin the Union. In fact, the document only freed slaves in the regions where the federal government had no power or control over. In addition, the proclamation did not apply to the border states who had remained loyal to the Union or in the areas of the Confederacy that were under Union control. Lincoln's proclamation was merely a justification of taking property from the enemy, to what's deemed as "contraband, if the South refused to surrender by January 1, 1863 (Lincoln). In this sense, it can be considered that it was the slaves who emancipated themselves. There has been a long history of self-emancipation such as Harriet Tubman who is a prime example of escaping slavery herself as well as helping lead many others escape to their freedom (LEP 13-4). Frederick Douglass was another instance in which a slave had emancipated themselves. His book the Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass showcases his story in which he escaped the brutality of slavery and found a life for himself as well as becoming a prominent activist and public speaker who sought to put an end to the practice of slavery (Douglass). Moreover, Lincoln promised to enforce all laws upholding slavery including the Fugitive Slave Act, desperate to appease slaveholders, Lincoln even supported a thirteenth amendment to the Constitution, the Corwin Amendment, which would have guaranteed slavery forever.

It was the enslaved men and women who escaped towards Union lines seeking refuge and their boldness of refusing to go back into captivity that truly ended slavery. The actions of those many self-emancipated refugees were what eventually "forced Lincoln and Congress to modify their war aims and formulate a policy that reflected a slave-imitated reality" (Williams 415). Lincoln had merely saw the self-emancipated refugees as an advantage of stripping the South's main resource and took advantage of the situation. Therefore, Lincoln on paper did help free the slaves; however crediting him as the Great Emancipator is misunderstanding and inaccurate as he would not be deemed the "Great Emancipator" if not for the slaves themselves who ran towards Union army for their freedom, which prompted him to take advantage of the situation.

There is no doubt that Lincoln has contributed much to bringing the nation together to what it is today. However, his true intentions in freeing the slaves and being deemed as the "Great Emancipator" is questionable and inaccurate. It is not a question of whether Lincoln was Lincoln

was a great President but rather if he specifically freed the slaves from slavery that many people are misunderstood to believe. Lincoln sacrificed and contributed much toward preserving the Union and in name only through the Emancipation Proclamation, he can be considered to have freed the slaves on paper; however in a more physical aspect, it was the slaves themselves who had bravely ran away from the South seeking freedom was what prompted Lincoln to take initiative of the situation. His title of being the "Great Emancipator" has misled many generations into believing that Lincoln had ended slavery when in actuality, his true intentions was merely to preserve the Union, whether slaves in the process were kept enslaved or freed.

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