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## The Changes Of African American Lives After Emancipation Proclamation

There have been many significant events that have happened in the history of America, from the first European settlement in North America in 1565, to the Seven Years' war and to the American Revolutionary war in 1775, but none have altered pre-existing conceptions of the white Americans directed towards former African American slavery than the Emancipation Proclamation speech from arguably, (according to nearly 100 historians and biographers who rated 43 US presidents on 10 qualities of presidential leadership), from the most influential American president in the history of America, Abraham Lincoln. With the Civil war nearing its end, Lincoln, against the wishes of several high-profile politicians, set an executive order on January 1, 1863, to which he proclaimed that "all persons held as slaves within any state or designated part of a state, ..... shall be then, thenceforward and forever free." This proclamation became known as the Emancipation Proclamation.

The initial impact was stark, as upon the announcement of this hugely influential proclamation, provoked an increase in slaves escaping from their white owners, and turned the war into what was a political war, where Lincoln's main priority was the preservation of the Union to a moral war, inducing revised, existing perceptions and widely held beliefs from the white Americans about whether, religiously, their actions towards former African Americans were moral or not. But unlike many widely held beliefs about the Emancipation Proclamation, it must be said that it was never the expectation from Lincoln to abolish slavery but rather, the original purpose and still upon the proclamation of Emancipation, the main purpose for Lincoln was the preservation of the Union, also the realisation that in doing abolishing slavery, it would weaken the Confederacy, an organisation whose economy largely relied on the utilisation of slaves but to also, dissuade the European imperial powers from supporting the Confederacy whilst at the same time, former slaves would help strengthen the Union army. Now, it should be said that to say that Lincoln did not agree with the idea of the abolishment of slavery would be deeply insulting and further from the truth, but to say that the abolishment of slavery was the key aim in the Civil War would be foolish and to a certain extent, a danger would alter the true significance of the Civil War.

However, Lincoln's original plan was to let the long-held principles of the South on their attitudes towards pro-slavery dissolve by itself, although the very thought of the Union becoming disbanded through the glory of the confederacy prompted Lincoln to swiftly act, and act with such impact that it has left rippling effects in their decisions politically, economically and the key factor that this essay will focus on, socially. As expected, the Emancipation Proclamation breathed new life into the freedmen, who finally had this unveiling that left them in an open playing field. But what is most interesting are the events that follow after the Civil War, particularly the Reconstruction Era, during which former African American slaves were looking for the answer to an extremely, difficult philosophical question. What is freedom? And more importantly, what freedom would compensate about a century's worth of humiliation, torture, suffering the prideful black community had to endure? At the same time, the North, the side who had announced the Emancipation Proclamation struggled to conclude where former African American slaves would function in society, but none more so than the South, whose economy relied so heavily on slavery, had become conflicted and desperate in attempting to find an

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alternative that could match the economic generating machine, that was so prevalent in the Civil War. To summarise, the Emancipation Proclamation, transformed a war of armies into a conflict of societies, with slavery at the heart of it all. Former slaves were legally set free, but a lack of identity and a sense of direction led to a stagnant progression that was dreamed of, but never acted on, with society as a whole, unable to replicate the same ambition and desire shown by these former slaves.

In this essay, I will be using a wide variety of sources, such as key first-hand recounts from former slaves and other notable, involved figures, to visual sources and numerous other historians such as Eric Foner. My main thesis will be to question the effectiveness of the Emancipation Proclamation and this will be analysed through the events that followed soon after the Civil War, an era filled with controversy and polarising perspectives, formally known as the Reconstruction Era.

Firstly, to evaluate the effectiveness of emancipation one has to define it. Defining this word is arguably difficult, and would require a definite set of rules for it to be generalised and applied. However, the key problem with this fixed approach is that it fails to take into account is that no definition is definite, and through historical events and the natural order of time, definitions and terminology stands to be altered, exerting a difference in meaning than as previously expressed before. The most sensible and intuitive approach to take in this scenario is to define what freedom meant during the Reconstruction Era, but rather than accepting a former African American slave's intake on the concept of freedom, one must create a variable for freedom that is application and balanced. This may seem counter-intuitive, after all, shouldn't freedom be what former African American slaves insisted it to be? In some ways, that may be correct, but the underlying problem is that in reality, most former African American slaves did not understand or more importantly, experience a life under the influence of freedom: They were tortured and treated as inferior humans, and an effective tool to be capitalised especially in Cotton plantations. For many, the definition of freedom was to be presented with a fair opportunity to reunite with family lost through years of slavery, either by selling or escaping, to ensure their children had education to gain a deeper insight into life and develop as an individual and this should come to no surprise but to be abstained from ever experiencing violence and sexual exploitation that was an overwhelming presence in the institution of slavery and to also be able to secure occupations that could provide for one's family.<sup>2</sup> This, it turns out, is an effective definition and concept of freedom. Unfortunately, even with the most ambiguous term such as freedom, will have limitations. An example of this would be that freedom does not protect itself from racial hatred, unequal opportunities or a factor that escalated even further than the reconstruction era, discrimination which continued towards the tail end of the 20th century. The realization of the newly found freedom that a former slave possessed was incredible, with exponential growth and development close by, and this is what the emancipation proclamation brought upon the freedmen. A complicated, frustrating dilemma that offered them to unleash their sealed wings and fly only to find out that there is a wider cage representing itself as an obstacle, one that cannot be escaped even with the power of freedom. And with this came inevitable exploitations from the South who sought to revert back to an institution as equal to slavery or perhaps, close to it.

However, all was not bleak as the opportunity for enlisting in the Union army, breathed sudden life into the illusion of the promise that came with the Emancipation proclamation, as many now former slaves, escaped their white masters and forged a new sense of purpose in their dreary lives. 180,000 blacks served in the Union Army. Initially, the enlistment to the army was the only

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route to “freedom” (the freedom we previously defined earlier), as the army presented them with an array of opportunities. Some included learning how to read and write, made possible by the establishment of literary clubs, whom were funded by the soldiers themselves. This enabled them to obtain a key desire fulfilled, and that was an access to education. Another advantage that must be deemed noteworthy is the changed perceptions towards the black soldiers as the Union realised the hugely significant contribution that they displayed in not only winning the Civil War, but also partially dictating the consequences of the direction that the United States of America would take after the Union’s victorious leap over the Confederacy. For the first time in American History, black people were, at least socially treated equal to white people before the law, or to be more precise, military law of which was applied to all soldiers in the military.

As aforementioned, the open enlistment requested by the army, opened many doors for further advancement and opportunities for former slaves, with what many felt as an acceleration or jumping ahead in status and this was widely evident in the number of influential positions that former slaves held; forty-one delegates to state constitutional conventions, sixty legislators, three lieutenant governors, and four congressmen. This all suggested in a change of century-long perceptions of African Americans of being idle, or with the case of women born into slavery, labelled as “Jezebels” (accused of tempting their white masters into sexual relations) to a race in need of assuming a “new status among us” as one senator observed in 1864. Although the black contribution did not leave long in the memory, it prompted a formation of a black community, one now capable of priding themselves with added history that was recognized by black people, but also universally. Such was the magnitude of pride on display that an Alabama planter reported in 1867, “They say, the Yankees never could have whipped the South without the aid of the negroes.”

Overall, the army allowed the momentum for the Emancipation Proclamation to increase and the popularity with which it was held in, escalated, as former African American slaves recognized the power and impact it held, as “freedom” granted them an indirect route to education, change in existing perceptions, but also an exciting opportunity to form a unique history, a history that they were in control of, which appealed to many Freedmen, as it brought upon them, a renewed sense of purpose, an objective, or boldly stated, a mandatory mission with which they must take to improve futures for their children, children who had to prepare themselves to carry this mission.