

The JBHE Foundation

How President Lincoln Decided to Issue the Emancipation Proclamation

Author(s): James M. McPherson

Source: *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, No. 37 (Autumn, 2002), pp. 108-109

Published by: The JBHE Foundation

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3134305>

Accessed: 06/11/2009 19:41

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=chii>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



*The JBHE Foundation is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*.*

How President Lincoln Decided to Issue The Emancipation Proclamation

by James M. McPherson

Editor's Note: On September 17, 1862, near Sharpsburg, Maryland, 23,000 young men fell dead or wounded in the battle of Antietam. Here, the noted Princeton University civil war historian James M. McPherson explains how Antietam brought President Lincoln to the decision to issue the Emancipation Proclamation.

"I AM NATURALLY anti-slavery," Lincoln insisted. "If slavery is not wrong, nothing is wrong." Yet, "I have never understood that the Presidency conferred upon me an unrestricted right to act officially upon this judgment and feeling." Because he had no constitutional power to interfere with slavery in the states, and because he needed to retain the support of border states and Democrats, Lincoln in the first year of the war repeatedly defined his policy as *restoration* of the Union — which of course meant a Union with slavery.

From the beginning, however, abolitionists and radical Republicans echoed the words of black leader Frederick Douglass: "To fight against slaveholders, without fighting against slavery, is but a half-hearted business. War for the destruction of liberty must be met with war for the destruction of slavery." More and more Republicans — eventually including Lincoln — came to agree with this idea as the war ground on. They took note of southern boasts that slavery was a "tower of strength to the Confederacy" because slaves did most of the labor in the South, thus enabling Confederates "to place in the field a force so much larger in proportion to her [white] population than the North." Douglass declared that he could not understand "Why? Oh! why in the name of all that is national, does our Government allow its enemies this powerful advantage? The very stomach of the rebellion is the Negro in the condition of a slave. Arrest that hoe in the hands of the Negro, and you smite rebellion in the very seat of its life."

Slave labor was so important in Confederate armies as well as on the home front that the government impressed slaves into service before it began drafting white men as soldiers. Thousands of slaves worked as army laborers, teamsters,

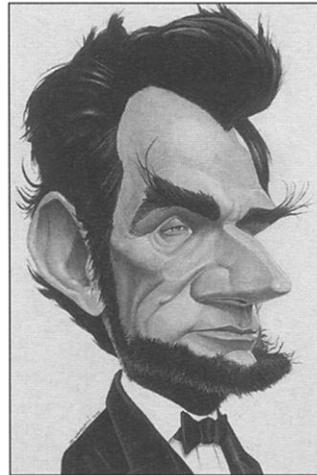
James M. McPherson is the George Henry Davis Professor of History at Princeton University. This article is adapted from his new book, *Crossroads of Freedom — Antietam: The Battle That Changed the Course of the Civil War* (Oxford University Press, 2002). Copyright © 2002 by James M. McPherson. Used by permission of Oxford University Press, Inc.

cooks, musicians, servants, and in other support capacities. They provided much of the logistical "tail" of these armies (functions initially performed by white soldiers and civilians in Union armies) and thereby freed a high proportion of Confederate soldiers for combat duty. As time passed, more and more Yankees began asking: Why not convert this southern asset of black labor into a northern asset by confiscating slaves as enemy property, freeing them, and putting them to work for the Union?

Five days after the battle of Antietam in September 1862, Lincoln called a special meeting of the Cabinet. He reminded members of their decision two months earlier to postpone issuance of an emancipation proclamation. "I think the time has come now," the president continued. "I wish it was a better time. The action of

the army against the rebels has not been quite what I should have best liked. But they have been driven out of Maryland." When the enemy was at Frederick, Lincoln had made a "promise to myself and (hesitating a little) to my Maker" that "if God gave us the victory in the approaching battle, [I] would consider it an indication of Divine will" in favor of emancipation. Lincoln suggested that Antietam was God's sign that "he had decided this question in favor of the slaves." Therefore, said the president, he intended that day to issue the proclamation warning Confederate states that unless they returned to the Union by January 1, 1863, their slaves "shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free."

Perhaps no consequence of Antietam was more momentous than this one. It changed the character of the war, as General-in-Chief Halleck noted in a communication to Ulysses S. Grant: "There is now no possible hope of reconciliation. We must conquer the rebels or be conquered by them. Every slave withdrawn from the enemy is the equivalent of a white man put *hors de combat*." The proclamation would apply only to states in rebellion, which produced some confusion because it thus seemed to "liberate" those slaves who were mostly beyond Union authority while leav-



ing in bondage those in the border states. This apparent anomaly caused disappointment among some abolitionists and radical Republicans. But most of them recognized that the commander-in-chief's legal powers extended only to *enemy* property. Some of that "property," however, *would* be freed by the Proclamation or by the practical forces of war because thousands of contrabands in Confederate states were already within Union lines.

And in any event, the symbolic power of the Proclamation changed the war from one to restore the Union into one to destroy the old Union and build a new one purged of human bondage. "God Bless Abraham Lincoln!" blazoned Horace Greeley's *New York Tribune* on September 23. "It is the beginning of the end of the rebellion; the beginning of the new life of the nation." The Emancipation Proclamation "is one of those stupendous facts in human history which marks not only an era in the progress of the nation, but an epoch in the history of the world." Speaking for African Americans, Frederick Douglass declared, "We shout for joy that we live to record this righteous decree."

Democrats almost unanimously denounced the Proclamation and vowed to campaign against it in the fall congressional elections. Many border-state Unionists also complained loudly. Lincoln had already discounted this opposition, which had once concerned him so greatly. He had tried in vain to get the border states to move voluntarily, but now "we must make the forward movement" without them, he told the Cabinet. "They [will] acquiesce, if not immediately, soon." As for the Democrats, "their clubs would be used against us take what course we might."

More serious, perhaps, was the potential for opposition in the army, especially by McClellanite officers in the Army of

the Potomac. There was good reason for worry about this. General Fitz-John Porter branded Lincoln's document "the absurd proclamation of a political coward." It has "caused disgust and expressions of disloyalty, to the views of the administration" in the army, wrote Porter privately. McClellan himself considered the Proclamation "infamous" and told

his wife that he could not "make up my mind to fight for such an accursed doctrine as that of a servile insurrection." General McClellan consulted Democratic friends in New York, who advised him "to submit to the President's proclamation and quietly continue doing my duty as a soldier." He even took action to quiet loose talk among some of his subordinates about marching on Washington to overthrow the government. On October 7 McClellan issued a general order reminding the

army of its duty of obedience to civil authority. "The remedy for political errors, if any are committed," he noted in a none-too-subtle reference to the forthcoming elections, "is to be found in the action of the people at the polls."

The issue of emancipation would continue — at times dangerously — to divide the army and the northern public for another six months or more. But in the end, as the *Springfield (Mass.) Republican* predicted on September 24, 1862, it would "be sustained by the great mass of the loyal people." These were the people who agreed with Lincoln's words in his message to Congress on December 1, 1862: "Without slavery the rebellion could never have existed; without slavery it could not continue." The *Springfield Republican* proved to be right when it anticipated that "by the courage and prudence of the President, the greatest social and political revolution of the age will be triumphantly carried through in the midst of a civil war."



In 1862, after a draft of the Emancipation Proclamation became public, a British political cartoonist showed President Lincoln playing the race card in what was called a desperate attempt to save the Union by fostering a slave rebellion in the Confederate states.