

Does It Matter Who Ended Slavery?



The African American Civil War Memorial (also known as the *Spirit of Freedom*).

Photo by Peter Fitzgerald.

Supporting Questions

1. What legal steps ended slavery?
2. What arguments do historians make about who ended slavery?
3. What are the implications of the debate over who ended slavery?

High School Emancipation Inquiry

Does it Matter Who Ended Slavery?

Framework for Teaching American Slavery	Summary Objective 17, Key Content E: The Emancipation Proclamation was the result of several factors: Lincoln's opposition to slavery, the changing sentiment in the North about the necessity of ending slavery as a way to end the war, the valor of the African-American soldiers who fought for freedom and the self-emancipation of hundreds of thousands of enslaved Southerners who had already fled to Union lines.
Staging the Question	Read and discuss excerpts from <i>The Washington Post</i> article "On Emancipation Day in D.C., Two Memorials Tell Very Different Stories" and compare images of the Emancipation Memorial and the African American Civil War Memorial.

Supporting Question 1	Supporting Question 2	Supporting Question 3
What legal steps ended slavery?	What arguments do historians make about who ended slavery?	What are the implications of the debate over who ended slavery?
Formative Performance Task	Formative Performance Task	Formative Performance Task
Create an annotated timeline that describes legal steps taken between 1861 and 1865 to end slavery.	Construct a T-chart that contrasts arguments that Lincoln freed enslaved people with arguments that enslaved people freed themselves.	Develop an evidence-based claim that explains the implications of the debate over who ended slavery.
Featured Sources	Featured Sources	Featured Sources
Source A: The Confiscation Acts, Excerpts (1861-1862). Source B: The Emancipation Proclamation, Excerpt (1863). Source C: The 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution (1865).	Source A: "Who Freed the Slaves?" by James M. McPherson (1995). Source B: "Who Freed the Slaves? Emancipation and Its Meaning in American Life" by Ira Berlin (1996).	Source A: "Who Freed the Slaves?" by James M. McPherson (1995). Source B: "Who Freed the Slaves? Emancipation and Its Meaning in American Life" by Ira Berlin (1996).

Summative Performance Task	ARGUMENT Does it matter who ended slavery? Construct an argument (e.g., detailed outline, poster or essay) that addresses the compelling question using specific claims and relevant evidence from historical sources while acknowledging competing views. EXTENSION Examine the story of emancipation told by a history textbook and propose revisions.
Taking Informed Action	UNDERSTAND Watch the film <i>Lincoln</i> . ASSESS Using evidence generated from the inquiry as support, discuss the extent to which the film accurately depicts the end of slavery. ACT Write a review of the film and post it to www.IMDB.com .

Overview

Inquiry Description

The common narrative about the end of slavery has given credit to President Abraham Lincoln, who earned the nickname “The Great Emancipator.” However, over the past 30 years, many scholars have sought to revise this narrative, and a critical mass of historians now argue that enslaved people freed themselves. It is important to note that, in their contrasting interpretations, scholars do not really disagree on the facts of emancipation, but rather on the interpretation of those facts.

This inquiry invites students to engage with the actual historical debate, but rather than focusing on the veracity of claims, students concentrate on the significance of the issues behind the claims. They look at the laws that emancipated certain enslaved people over time and then examine the arguments contemporary historians have made about who was responsible for freeing enslaved people. By exploring the controversy about who freed enslaved people, students should understand why this issue matters 150 years later. The goal of this inquiry is to introduce students to the process of thinking and acting like historians.

Structure of the Inquiry

In addressing the compelling question, “How did slavery shape my state?” students work through a series of supporting questions, formative performance tasks and featured sources in order to construct an argument supported by evidence and counterevidence from a variety of sources.

Length of the Inquiry

This inquiry is designed to take three to five 40-minute class periods. Inquiries are not scripts, so you are encouraged to modify and adapt them to meet the needs and interests of your students. The inquiry time frame could expand if you think your students need additional instructional experiences (i.e., supporting questions, formative performance tasks and featured sources). Resources should be modified as necessary to meet individualized education programs (IEPs) or Section 504 Plans for students with disabilities.

Staging the Compelling Question: Does it matter who ended slavery?

Compelling Question	Does it matter who ended slavery?
Featured Sources	<p>Source A: “On Emancipation Day in D.C., Two Memorials Tell Very Different Stories,” by Joe Heim. <i>The Washington Post</i>, April 15, 2012.</p> <p>Source B: Photos of the Emancipation Memorial and the African American Civil War Memorial.</p>

THIS INQUIRY OPENS WITH THE QUESTION, “Does it matter who ended slavery?” The goal of this inquiry is to introduce students to historiography as they wrestle with historical significance within the context of a historical controversy.

FEATURED SOURCE A is *The Washington Post* article “On Emancipation Day in D.C., Two Memorials Tell Very Different Stories.” The article shows how this debate over emancipation continues into the present day and is available online through *The Washington Post*.

FEATURED SOURCE B includes images of the two statues discussed in the story: The Emancipation Memorial and the African American Civil War Memorial.

You could use these resources to facilitate a discussion about the process of emancipation, the ways historians and citizens interpret events such as emancipation and the continuous nature of these ongoing historical conversations.

Staging the Compelling Question: Does it matter who ended slavery?

Featured Source	Source A: “ On Emancipation Day in D.C., Two Memorials Tell Very Different Stories ,” by Joe Heim. <i>The Washington Post</i> , April 15, 2012.
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Staging the Compelling Question: Does it matter who ended slavery?

Featured Source	Source B: The Emancipation Memorial by Thomas Ball (1876). The African American Civil War Memorial (also known as <i>The Spirit of Freedom</i>) by Ed Hamilton (1997), photograph by Peter Fitzgerald.
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IMAGE 1

Introduction: The Emancipation Memorial honors President Abraham Lincoln and is located in Washington D.C. It was designed and sculpted by Thomas Ball and has stood in Lincoln Park since 1876.



Karen Bleier/AFP/Getty Images

IMAGE 2

Introduction: The African American Civil War Memorial, also called The Spirit of Freedom, honors the African-American sailors and soldiers who fought in the Civil War. Located near the African American Civil War Museum, the statue was designed and sculpted by Ed Hamilton and has stood in Washington D.C. since 1997.



Peter Fitzgerald/CC BY-SA, 2008

Supporting Question 1: What legal steps ended slavery?

Supporting Question	What legal steps ended slavery?
Formative Performance Task	Create an annotated timeline that describes legal steps taken between 1861 and 1865 to end slavery.
Featured Sources	<p>Source A: The Confiscation Acts, Excerpts (1861-1862).</p> <p>Source B: The Emancipation Proclamation, Excerpt (1863).</p> <p>Source C: The 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution (1865).</p>

THE FIRST SUPPORTING QUESTION—“What legal steps ended slavery?”—asks students to consider the legal timeline of emancipation.

FEATURED SOURCE A is significant for two reasons. The Confiscation Acts are the first federal laws to emancipate enslaved people, and they also served as evidence that enslaved people were running away on their own. The first Confiscation Act authorized the Union army to confiscate any property used by the Confederacy. Because enslaved people legally categorized as property, they could also be seized and freed by Union officials. The second Confiscation Act specifically authorized the emancipation of enslaved people in areas that came under Union control.

FEATURED SOURCE B, the Emancipation Proclamation, is significant in highlighting the relationship between the Civil War and the abolition of slavery, though students should be encouraged to note that the Proclamation ended slavery only in rebelling states, which the North did not control at the time, and that slavery continued within the Union in the border states.

FEATURED SOURCE C, the 13th Amendment to the Constitution, marks the actual legal abolishment of slavery in the United States.

THE FIRST FORMATIVE PERFORMANCE TASK asks students to use these sources to create an annotated timeline that describes the legal steps taken between 1861 and 1865 to end slavery.

Supporting Question 1: What legal steps ended slavery?

Featured Source

Source A: The First and Second Confiscation Acts, Excerpts (1861–1862). Available through the [Freedmen and Southern Society Project](#).

PASSAGE 1

An Act to confiscate Property used for Insurrectionary Purposes - August 6, 1861

SEC. 4. *And be it further enacted*, That whenever hereafter, during the present insurrection against the Government of the United States, any person claimed to be held to labor or service under the law of any State, shall be required or permitted by the person to whom such labor or service is claimed to be due, or by the lawful agent of such person, to take up arms against the United States, or shall be required or permitted by the person to whom such labor or service is claimed to be due, or his lawful agent, to work or to be employed in or upon any fort, navy yard, dock, armory, ship, entrenchment, or in any military or naval service whatsoever, against the Government and lawful authority of the United States, then, and in every such case, the person to whom such labor or service is claimed to be due shall forfeit his claim to such labor, any law of the State or of the United States to the contrary notwithstanding. And whenever thereafter the person claiming such labor or service shall seek to enforce his claim, it shall be a full and sufficient answer to such claim that the person whose service or labor is claimed had been employed in hostile service against the Government of the United States, contrary to the provisions of this act.

PASSAGE 2

An Act to suppress Insurrection, to punish Treason and Rebellion, to seize and confiscate the Property of Rebels, and for other Purposes - July 17, 1862

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled, That every person who shall hereafter commit the crime of treason against the United States, and shall be adjudged guilty thereof, shall suffer death, and all his slaves, if any, shall be declared and made free; or, at the discretion of the court, he shall be imprisoned for not less than five years and fined not less than ten thousand dollars, and all his slaves, if any, shall be declared and made free...

SEC. 9. *And be it further enacted*, That all slaves of persons who shall hereafter be engaged in rebellion against the government of the United States, or who shall in any way give aid or comfort thereto, escaping from such persons and taking refuge within the lines of the army; and all slaves captured from such persons or deserted by them and coming under the control of the government of the United States; and all slaves of such person found on [or] being within any place occupied by rebel forces and afterwards occupied by the forces of the United States, shall be deemed captives of war, and shall be forever free of their servitude, and not again held as slaves.

SEC. 10. *And be it further enacted*, That no slave escaping into any State, Territory, or the District of Columbia, from any other State, shall be delivered up, or in any way impeded or hindered of his liberty, except for crime, or some offence against the laws, unless the person claiming said fugitive shall first make oath that the person to whom the labor or service of such fugitive is alleged to be due is his lawful owner, and has not borne arms against the United States in the present rebellion, nor in any way given aid and comfort thereto; and no person engaged in the military or naval service of the United States shall, under any pretence whatever, assume to decide on the validity of the claim of any person to the service or labor of any other person, or surrender up any such person to the claimant, on pain of being dismissed from the service.

Supporting Question 1: What legal steps ended slavery?

Featured Source

Source B: [The Emancipation Proclamation](#), Excerpt (1863). Available through the National Archives and Records Administration.

Whereas, on the twenty-second day of September, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty-two, a proclamation was issued by the President of the United States, containing, among other things, the following, to wit:

"That on the first day of January, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty-three, all persons held as slaves within any State or designated part of a State, the people whereof shall then be in rebellion against the United States, shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free; and the Executive Government of the United States, including the military and naval authority thereof, will recognize and maintain the freedom of such persons, and will do no act or acts to repress such persons, or any of them, in any efforts they may make for their actual freedom...

Now, therefore I, Abraham Lincoln, President of the United States, by virtue of the power in me vested as Commander-in-Chief, of the Army and Navy of the United States in time of actual armed rebellion against the authority and government of the United States, and as a fit and necessary war measure for suppressing said rebellion, do, on this first day of January, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty-three, and in accordance with my purpose so to do publicly proclaimed for the full period of one hundred days, from the day first above mentioned, order and designate as the States and parts of States wherein the people thereof respectively, are this day in rebellion against the United States, the following, to wit:

Arkansas, Texas, Louisiana, (except the Parishes of St. Bernard, Plaquemines, Jefferson, St. John, St. Charles, St. James Ascension, Assumption, Terrebonne, Lafourche, St. Mary, St. Martin, and Orleans, including the City of New Orleans) Mississippi, Alabama, Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, and Virginia, (except the forty-eight counties designated as West Virginia, and also the counties of Berkley, Accomac, Northampton, Elizabeth City, York, Princess Ann, and Norfolk, including the cities of Norfolk and Portsmouth[]), and which excepted parts, are for the present, left precisely as if this proclamation were not issued.

And by virtue of the power, and for the purpose aforesaid, I do order and declare that all persons held as slaves within said designated States, and parts of States, are, and henceforward shall be free; and that the Executive government of the United States, including the military and naval authorities thereof, will recognize and maintain the freedom of said persons.

And I hereby enjoin upon the people so declared to be free to abstain from all violence, unless in necessary self-defence; and I recommend to them that, in all cases when allowed, they labor faithfully for reasonable wages...

Supporting Question 1: What legal steps ended slavery?

Featured Source

Source C: [The 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution](#) (1865). Available through the National Archives and Records Administration.

Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.

Supporting Question 2: What arguments do historians make about who ended slavery?

Supporting Question	What arguments do historians make about who ended slavery?
Formative Performance Task	Construct a T-chart that contrasts arguments that President Lincoln freed enslaved people with arguments that enslaved people freed themselves.
Featured Sources	<p>Source A: “Who Freed the Slaves?” by James M. McPherson (1995).</p> <p>Source B: “Who Freed the Slaves? Emancipation and Its Meaning in American Life,” by Ira Berlin (1996).</p>

THE SECOND SUPPORTING QUESTION—“What arguments do historians make about who ended slavery?”—turns students’ attention from learning the legal timeline for emancipation to considering historical arguments about who was responsible for it. To answer this question, students will read essays by historians to understand the debate about who should ultimately receive credit for emancipation.

FEATURED SOURCE A is an essay by noted Civil War historian James McPherson that makes the case that Lincoln ended slavery. Two passages are provided, an excerpt and a full text, so you can choose which passage better suits your class. As you do so, please note that these sources apply to supporting questions two and three, though students will focus on different aspects of the essays for each question. For Supporting Question Two, students should focus on the argument that McPherson makes about Lincoln, not his argument about other historians.

FEATURED SOURCE B is Ira Berlin’s response to James McPherson, in which he argues that enslaved people were the primary force behind their own emancipation. Again, two passages are included: an excerpt and the full essay. For Supporting Question Two, students should focus more on the claims Berlin makes about abolition and the evidence he uses to back those claims than on his argument about other historians.

THE SECOND FORMATIVE PERFORMANCE TASK asks students to create a T-chart that identifies the evidence used as support for each argument.

Supporting Question 3: What are the implications of the debate over who ended slavery?

Supporting Question	What are the implications of the debate over who ended slavery?
Formative Performance Task	Develop an evidence-based claim that explains the implications of the debate over who ended slavery.
Featured Sources	<p>Source A: “Who Freed the Slaves?” by James M. McPherson (1995).</p> <p>Source B: “Who Freed the Slaves? Emancipation and Its Meaning in American Life,” by Ira Berlin (1996).</p>

THE THIRD SUPPORTING QUESTION—“What are the implications of the debate over who ended slavery?”—builds on students’ understanding of the historical arguments by asking them to consider the value of this historical debate.

FEATURED SOURCES A & B are identical to the sources used for Supporting Question Two. This time, instead of focusing on the evidence used to support the historians’ arguments, students should focus on the problems each historian believes are created by the other’s interpretation.

THE THIRD FORMATIVE PERFORMANCE TASK calls on students to develop an evidence-based claim that explains the implications of the debate over who ended slavery.

Supporting Questions 2 & 3: What arguments do historians make about who ended slavery? What are the implications of the debate over who ended slavery?

Featured Source

Source A: “Who Freed the Slaves?” by James McPherson. Published in *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 139, No. 1 (1995): 1-10.

PASSAGE 1

Introduction: This is an excerpt of James McPherson’s essay “Who Freed the Slaves?” In this introductory passage, McPherson examines the role of Abraham Lincoln in emancipation. Passage Two of this source includes the full text of this article, but the text excerpted below may be more appropriate for some classrooms or lessons.

The traditional answer to the question posed by the title of this paper is: Abraham Lincoln freed the slaves. In recent years, though, this answer has been challenged as another example of elitist history, of focusing only on the actions of great white males and ignoring the actions of the overwhelming majority of the people, who also make history. If we were to ask our question of professional historians today, the reply would, I think, be quite different. As Robert Engs put it: “THE SLAVES FREED THEMSELVES.”¹ They saw the Civil War as a potential war for abolition well before Lincoln did. By voting with their feet for freedom—by escaping from their masters to Union military camps in the South—they forced the issue of emancipation on the Lincoln administration. By creating a situation in which northern officials would either have to return them to slavery or acknowledge their freedom, these “contrabands,” as they came to be called, “acted resolutely to place their freedom—and that of their posterity—on the wartime agenda.”² Union officers, then Congress, and finally Lincoln decided to confiscate this human property belonging to the enemy and put it to work for the Union in the form of servants, teamsters, laborers, and eventually soldiers in northern armies. Weighed in the scale of Civil War, these 190,000 black soldiers and sailors and a larger number of black army laborers tipped the balance in favor of Union victory.

The foremost exponent of the black self-emancipation thesis is the historian and theologian Vincent Harding whose book *There is a River: The Black Struggle for Freedom in America*, published in 1981, has become almost a Bible for the argument. “While Lincoln continued to hesitate about the legal, constitutional, moral, and military aspects of the matter,” wrote Harding, “the relentless movement of the self-liberated fugitives into the Union lines...took their freedom into their own hands. “The Emancipation Proclamation, when it finally came, merely “confirmed and gave ambiguous legal standing to the freedom which black people had already claimed through their own surging, living proclamations.”³

This thesis has received the stamp of authority from the Freedmen and Southern Society project at the University of Maryland. The slaves, write the editors of this project, were “the prime movers in securing their own liberty.”⁴ Barbara J. Fields has given wide publicity to this theme. On camera in the PBS television documentary “The Civil War” and in an essay in the volume accompanying the series, she insisted that “freedom did not come to the slaves from words on paper, either the words of Congress or those of the President,” but “from the initiative of the slave.”⁵

Endnotes

¹ Robert F. Engs, “The Great American Slave Rebellion,” paper delivered to the Civil War Institute at Gettysburg College, 27 June 1991, 3.

² Ira Berlin, Barbara J. Fields, Thavolia Glymph, Joseph P. Reidy, and Leslie S. Rowland, eds., *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation 1861–1867*, ser. 1, vol. 1, *The Destruction of Slavery* (Cambridge, 1985), 2.

³ Vincent Harding, *There Is a River: The Black Struggle for Freedom in America* (New York, 1981), 231, 230, 228, 235.

⁴ Berlin et al., eds., *The Destruction of Slavery*, 3.

⁵ Barbara J. Fields, “Who Freed the Slaves?” in Geoffrey C. Ward, *The Civil War: An Illustrated History* (New York, 1990), 181.

PASSAGE 2

Introduction: This is the complete text of James McPherson's "Who Freed the Slaves?" In this essay, McPherson examines the role of Abraham Lincoln in emancipation. Passage 1 of this source includes an excerpt of this article, but the full text included below may be more appropriate for some classrooms or lessons.

Who Freed the Slaves?

The traditional answer to the question posed by the title of this paper is: Abraham Lincoln freed the slaves. In recent years, though, this answer has been challenged as another example of elitist history, of focusing only on the actions of great white males and ignoring the actions of the overwhelming majority of the people, who also make history. If we were to ask our question of professional historians today, the reply would, I think, be quite different. As Robert Engs put it: "THE SLAVES FREED THEMSELVES."¹ They saw the Civil War as a potential war for abolition well before Lincoln did. By voting with their feet for freedom—by escaping from their masters to Union military camps in the South—they forced the issue of emancipation on the Lincoln administration. By creating a situation in which northern officials would either have to return them to slavery or acknowledge their freedom, these "contrabands," as they came to be called, "acted resolutely to place their freedom—and that of their posterity—on the wartime agenda."² Union officers, then Congress, and finally Lincoln decided to confiscate this human property belonging to the enemy and put it to work for the Union in the form of servants, teamsters, laborers, and eventually soldiers in northern armies. Weighed in the scale of Civil War, these 190,000 black soldiers and sailors and a larger number of black army laborers tipped the balance in favor of Union victory.

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There are two corollaries of the self-emancipation thesis: first, that Lincoln hindered more than he helped the cause; and second, that the image of him as the Great Emancipator is a myth created by whites to deprive blacks of credit for achieving their own freedom. This "reluctant ally of black freedom," wrote Harding, "placed the preservation of the white Union above the death of black slavery." Even as late as August 1862, when he wrote his famous letter to Horace Greeley stating that "if I could save the Union without freeing *any* slave, I would do it," he was "still trapped in his own obsession with saving the white Union at all costs, even the cost of continued black slavery."⁶ By exempting one-third of the South from the Emancipation Proclamation, writes Barbara Fields, "Lincoln was more determined to retain the goodwill of the slave owners than to secure the liberty of the slave." Despite Lincoln, though, "no human being alive could have held back the tide that swept toward freedom."⁷ But the white myth that Lincoln freed the slaves denied African Americans credit for this great revolution; it was, writes Robert Engs, a sort of tacit conspiracy among whites to convince blacks that "white America, personified by Abraham Lincoln, had *given* them their freedom

[rather] than allow them to realize the *empowerment* that their taking of it implied. The poor, uneducated freedman fell for that masterful propaganda stroke. But so have most of the rest of us, black and white, for over a century!”⁸

The self-emancipation thesis embodies an important truth. By coming into Union lines, by withdrawing their labor from Confederate owners, by working for the Union army and fighting as soldiers in it, slaves did play an active part in achieving their own freedom and, for that matter, in preserving the Union. Like workers, immigrants, women, and other so-called “non-elites,” the slaves were neither passive victims nor pawns of powerful white males who loom so large in our traditional image of the past. They too made a history that historians have finally discovered. That is all to the good. But by challenging the “myth” that Lincoln freed the slaves, proponents of the self-emancipation thesis are in danger of creating another myth—that he had little to do with it. It may turn out, upon close examination, that the traditional answer to the question “Who Freed the Slaves?” is closer to being the right answer than is the new and currently more fashionable answer.

First, one must ask what was the *sine qua non* of emancipation in the 1860s—the essential condition, the one thing without which it would not have happened. The clear answer is: the Civil War. Without the war there would have been no confiscation act, no Emancipation Proclamation, no Thirteenth Amendment (not to mention the Fourteenth and Fifteenth), certainly no self-emancipation, and almost certainly no end of slavery for several more decades. Slavery had existed in North America for more than two centuries before 1861, but except for a tiny fraction of slaves who fought in the Revolution, or escaped, or bought their freedom, there had been no self-emancipation during that time. Every slave insurrection and insurrection conspiracy had failed in the end. On the eve of the Civil War, plantation agriculture was more profitable, slavery more entrenched, slaveowners more prosperous, and the “slave power” more dominant within the South, if not in the nation at large, than it had ever been. Without the war, the door to freedom would have remained closed for an indefinite time.

What brought war and opened that door? Secession and the refusal of the United States government to recognize its legitimacy. In these matters Abraham Lincoln moves to center stage. Seven states seceded and formed the Confederacy because he won the presidency on an anti-slavery platform; four more seceded after shooting broke out when he refused to evacuate Fort Sumter; the shooting escalated to full-scale war because he called out troops to suppress rebellion. The common denominator in all the steps that opened the door to freedom was the active agency of Lincoln as antislavery political leader, president-elect president, and commander in chief.

The statement quoted earlier, that Lincoln “placed the preservation of the white Union above the death of black slavery,” while true in a narrow sense, is misleading when shorn of its context. From 1854, when he returned to politics, until nominated for president in 1860 the dominant, unifying theme of Lincoln’s career was opposition to the expansion of slavery as the first step toward placing it in the course of ultimate extinction. Over and over again, Lincoln denounced slavery as a “monstrous injustice,” “an unqualified evil to the negro, to the white man, to the soil, and to the State.” He attacked his main political rival, Stephen A. Douglas, for his “*declared* indifference” to the moral wrong of slavery. The principle of the Declaration of Independence and the principle of slavery, said Lincoln, “cannot stand together. . . . Our republican robe is soiled” by slavery. “Let us repurify it. . . . Let us readopt the Declaration of Independence, and with it, the practices, and policy, which harmonize with it. . . . If we do this, we shall not only have saved the Union; but we shall have so saved it, as to make, and to keep it, forever worthy of the saving.”⁹

Southerners read Lincoln’s speeches; they knew by heart his words about the house divided and the ultimate extinction of slavery. Lincoln’s election in 1860 was a sign that they had lost control of the national government; if they remained in the Union, they feared that ultimate extinction of their way of life would be their destiny. It was not merely Lincoln’s election, but his election as a *principled opponent of slavery on moral grounds* that precipitated secession. Abolitionists critical of Lincoln for falling short of their own standard nevertheless recognized this truth. No longer

would the slave power rule the nation, said Frederick Douglass. “Lincoln’s election has vitiated their authority, and broken their power.”¹⁰

But, we might ask, would not the election of any Republican in 1860 have precipitated secession? Probably not, if the candidate had been Edward Bates, who might conceivably have won the election but had not even an outside chance of winning the nomination. Yes, almost certainly, if William H. Seward had been the nominee. Seward’s earlier talk of a “higher law” and an “irrepressible conflict” had given him a more radical reputation than Lincoln. But Seward might not have won the election. More to the point, if he had won, seven states would undoubtedly have seceded, but Seward would have favored concessions to keep more from going out and perhaps to lure those seven back in. Most important of all, he probably would have evacuated Fort Sumter and thereby extinguished the spark that threatened to flame into war. As it was, Seward did his best to compel Lincoln into concessions and evacuation.

But Lincoln stood firm. When Seward flirted with the idea of supporting the Crittenden Compromise, Lincoln stiffened the backbones of Seward and other key Republicans. “Entertain no proposition for a compromise in regard to the *extension* of slavery,” he wrote to them. “The tug has to come, & better now, than any time hereafter.” Crittenden’s compromise “would lose us everything we gained by the election. Filibustering for all South of us, and making slave states would follow...to put us again on the high-road to a slave empire.” The proposal for concessions, Lincoln pointed out, “acknowledges that slavery has equal rights with liberty, and surrenders all we have contended for. ... We have just carried an election on principles fairly stated to the people. Now we are told in advance, the government shall be broken up, unless we surrender to those we have beaten. ... If we surrender, it is the end of us. They will repeat the experiment upon us *ad libitum*. A year will not pass, till we shall have to take Cuba as a condition upon which they will stay in the Union.”¹¹

These words shed a different light on the assertion, quoted earlier, that Lincoln “place the preservation of the white Union above the death of black slavery.” The Crittenden Compromise did indeed place preservation of the Union above the death of slavery. So did Seward; so did most white Americans during the secession crisis. But that assertion does *not* describe Lincoln. He refused to yield the core of his antislavery philosophy to stay the breakup of the Union. As Lincoln expressed it in a private letter to his old friend Alexander Stephens, “You think slavery is *right* and ought to be extended; while we think it is *wrong* and ought to be restricted. That I suppose is the rub.”¹² It was indeed the rub. Even more than in his election to the presidency, Lincoln’s agency in refusing to compromise on the expansion of slavery or on Fort Sumter proved decisive. If any other man had been in his position, the course of history—and of emancipation—would have been different. Here we have without question a *sine qua non*.

It is quite true that once the war started, Lincoln moved more slowly and apparently more reluctantly toward making it a war for freedom than black leaders, abolitionists, radical Republicans, and the slaves themselves wanted him to move. He did reassure southern whites that he had no intention and no constitutional power to interfere with slavery in the states. In September 1861 and May 1862 he revoked orders by Generals John C. Frémont and David Hunter freeing the slaves of Confederates in their military districts. In December 1861 he forced Secretary of War Simon Cameron to delete from his annual report a paragraph recommending the freeing and arming of slaves. And though Lincoln signed the confiscation acts of August 1861 and July 1862, which provided for freeing some slaves owned by Confederates, this legislation did not come from his initiative. Out in the field it was the slaves who escaped to Union lines and the officers like General Benjamin Butler who accepted them as “contraband of war,” that took the initiative.

All of this appears to support the thesis that slaves freed themselves and that Lincoln’s image as their emancipator is myth. But let us take a closer look. No matter how many thousands of slaves came into Union lines, the ultimate fate of the millions who did not, as well as the fate of the institution of slavery itself, depended on the outcome of the war. If the North won, slavery would be weakened if not destroyed; if the Confederacy won, slavery would survive and perhaps even grow stronger from the postwar territorial expansion of an independent and confident slave power.

Thus Lincoln's emphasis on the priority of Union had positive implications for emancipation, while premature actions against slavery might jeopardize the cause of Union and therefore boomerang in favor of slavery.

Lincoln's chief concern of 1861 was to maintain a united coalition of War Democrats and border-state Unionists as well as Republicans in support of the war effort. To do this he considered it essential to define the war as being waged solely for Union, which united this coalition, and not against slavery, which would fragment it. If he had let Frémont's emancipation edict stand, explained Lincoln to his old friend Orville Browning of Illinois, it might have lost the war by driving Kentucky into secession. "I think to lose Kentucky is nearly the same as to lose the whole game. Kentucky gone, we can not hold Missouri, nor, as I think, Maryland. These all against us, and the job on our hands is too large for us. We would as well consent to separation at once, including the surrender of this capitol."¹³

There is no reason to doubt the sincerity—and sagacity—of this statement. Lincoln's greatest skills as a political leader were his sensitivity to public opinion and his sense of timing. Opinion in the North began to move toward emancipation as an instrument of war in the spring of 1862, though such a step at that time probably would still have weakened more than strengthened the Union coalition. During those spring months Lincoln alternately coaxed and prodded border-state Unionists toward recognition of the potential escalation of the conflict into a war against slavery and toward acceptance of his plan for compensated emancipation in their states. He warned southern Unionists and northern Democrats in the summer of 1862 that he could not fight this war "with elder-stalk squirts, charged with rose water. . . . This government cannot much longer play a game in which it stakes all, and its enemies stake nothing."¹⁴

Lincoln's meaning, though veiled, was clear; he was about to add the weapon of emancipation to his arsenal. For when he penned these warnings, he had made up his mind to issue an emancipation proclamation. Whereas a year earlier, even three months earlier, Lincoln had believed that avoidance of the slavery issue was necessary to maintain that knife-edge balance in the Union coalition, things had now changed. The imminent prospect of Union victory in the spring had been shredded by Robert E. Lee's successful counteroffensive in the Seven Days battles. The risks of alienating the border states and northern Democrats were now outweighed by the opportunity to energize the Republican majority and to mobilize part of the slave population for the cause of Union—and freedom. Lincoln had become convinced that emancipation was "a military necessity, absolutely essential to the preservation of the Union." "The slaves," he told his cabinet, were "undeniably an element of strength to those who had their service, and we must decide whether that element should be with us or against us." Lincoln had earlier hesitated to act against slavery in the states because the Constitution protected it there. But now he insisted that "the rebels could not at the same time throw off the Constitution and invoke its aid. . . . Decisive and extensive measures must be adopted. . . . We [want] the army to strike more vigorous blows. The Administration must set an example, and strike at the heart of the rebellion"—slavery.¹⁵ Lincoln was done conciliating the forces of conservatism. He had tried to make the border states see reason; now "we must make the forward movement" without them. "They [will] acquiesce, if not immediately, soon." As for northern Democrats, "their clubs would be used against us take what course we might."¹⁶

In 1864 Lincoln told a visiting delegation of abolitionists that two years earlier "many of my strongest supporters urged *Emancipation* before I thought it indispensable, and, I may say, before I thought the country ready for it. It is my conviction that, had the proclamation been issued even six months earlier than it was, public sentiment would not have sustained it."¹⁷ Lincoln could actually have made a case that the country had not been ready for the Emancipation Proclamation in September 1862, even in January 1863. Democratic gains in northern congressional elections in the fall of 1862 resulted in part from a voter backlash against the preliminary Proclamation. The morale crisis in Union armies during the winter of 1862–63 grew in part from a resentful conviction that Lincoln had transformed the purpose of the war from restoring the Union to freeing the slaves. Without question, this issue bitterly divided the northern people and threatened fatally to erode support for the war effort—the very consequence Lincoln had feared in 1861. Not until after the twin military victories at Gettysburg and Vicksburg did divisiveness diminish and

emancipation gain something of an electoral mandate in the off-year state elections of 1863. In his annual message of December 8, 1863, Lincoln acknowledged that his Emancipation Proclamation a year earlier had been “followed by dark and doubtful days.” But now, he added, “the crisis which threatened to divide the friends of the Union is past.”¹⁸

Even that statement turned out to be premature. In the summer of 1864, northern morale again plummeted and the emancipation issue once more threatened to undermine the war effort. By August, Grant’s campaign in Virginia had bogged down in the trenches after enormous casualties, while Sherman seemed similarly stymied before Atlanta and smaller Union armies elsewhere appeared to be accomplishing nothing. Defeatism corroded the will of northerners as they contemplated the staggering cost of this conflict in the lives of their young men. Lincoln came under enormous pressure to open peace negotiations to end the slaughter. Even though Jefferson Davis insisted that Confederate independence was his essential condition for peace, northern Democrats managed to convince many people that only Lincoln’s insistence on emancipation blocked peace. A typical Democratic editorial declared that “tens of thousands of white men must yet bite the dust to allay the negro mania of the President.”¹⁹

Even Republicans like Horace Greeley, who had criticized Lincoln two years earlier for slowness to embrace emancipation, now criticized him for refusing to abandon it as a precondition for negotiations. The Democratic national convention adopted a platform for the 1864 presidential election calling for peace negotiations to restore the Union—with slavery. Every political observer, including Lincoln himself, believed in August that the Republicans would lose the election. The *New York Times* editor and Republican national chairman Henry Raymond told Lincoln that “two special causes are assigned [for] this great reaction in public sentiment,—the want of military success, and the impression...that we *can* have peace with Union if would...[but that you are] fighting not for Union but for the abolition of slavery.”²⁰

The pressure caused Lincoln to waver temporarily, but not to buckle. Instead, he told weak-kneed Republicans that “no human power can subdue this rebellion without using the Emancipation lever as I have done.” Some 130,000 black soldiers and sailors were fighting for the Union, said Lincoln. They would not do so if they thought the North intended to “betray them. ... If they stake their lives for us they must be prompted by the strongest motive ... the promise of freedom. And the promise being made, must be kept. ... There have been men who proposed to me to return to slavery the black warriors” who had fought for the Union. “I should be damned in time & in eternity for so doing. The world shall know that I will keep my faith to friends and enemies, come what will.”²¹

When Lincoln said this, he expected to lose the election. In effect he was saying that he would rather be right than president. In many ways this was his finest hour. As matters turned out, he was both right and president. Sherman’s capture of Atlanta, Sheridan’s victories in the Shenandoah Valley, and military success elsewhere transformed the northern mood from deepest despair in August to determined confidence by November, and Lincoln was triumphantly reelected. He won without compromising on the emancipation question. It is instructive to consider the possible alternatives to this outcome. If the Democrats had won, at best the Union would have been restored without a Thirteenth Amendment; at worst the Confederacy would have achieved its independence. In either case the institution of slavery would have survived. That this did not happen was owing more to the steadfast purpose of Abraham Lincoln than to any other single factor.

The proponents of the self-emancipation thesis, however, would avow that all this is irrelevant because by the time of the Emancipation Proclamation “no human being alive could have held back the tide that swept toward freedom.” But I disagree. The tide of freedom could have been swept back. On numerous occasions during the war, it was. When Union forces moved through or were compelled to retreat from areas of the Confederacy where their presence had attracted and liberated slaves, the tide of slavery closed in behind them and reenslaved those who could not keep up with the retreating or advancing armies. Many of the thousands that did keep up with the Army of the Ohio when it was forced out of Alabama and Tennessee by the Confederate invasion of Kentucky in the fall of 1862 were seized and

sold as slaves by Kentuckians. Lee's army captured dozens of black people in Pennsylvania in June 1863 and sent them South into slavery. Hundreds of black Union soldiers captured by Confederate forces were reenslaved. Lincoln himself took note of this phenomenon when he warned that if "the pressure of the war Should call off our forces from new Orleans to defend some other point, what is to prevent the masters from reducing the blacks to slavery again; for I am told that whenever the rebels take any black prisoners, free or slave, they immediately auction them off!"²² The editors of the Freedmen and Southern Society project concede that "Southern armies could recapture black people who had already reached Union lines. ... Indeed, any Union retreat could reverse the process of liberation and throw men and women who had tasted freedom back into bondage. ... Their travail testified to the link between the military success of the Northern armies and the liberty of Southern slaves."²³

Precisely. That is the crucial point. Most slaves did not emancipate themselves; they were liberated by Union armies. And who was the commander in chief that called these armies into being, appointed their generals, and gave them direction and purpose? There, indubitably, is our *sine qua non*.

But let us acknowledge that once the war was carried into slave territory, no matter how it came out, the ensuing "friction and abrasion" (as Lincoln once put it) would enable thousands of slaves to escape to freedom. In that respect, a degree of self-emancipation *did* occur. But even on a large scale, such emancipation was very different from *abolition of the institution of slavery*. That required Union victory; it required Lincoln's reelection in 1864; it required the Thirteenth Amendment. Lincoln played a vital role in all of these achievements. It was also his policies and his skillful political leadership that set in motion the processes by which the reconstructed or Unionist states of Louisiana, Arkansas, Tennessee, Maryland, and Missouri abolished the institution in those states during the war itself.

Regrettably, Lincoln did not live to see the final ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment. But if he had never lived, it seems safe to say that we would not have had a Thirteenth Amendment in 1865. In that sense, the traditional answer to the question "Who Freed the Slaves?" is the right answer. Lincoln did not accomplish this in the manner sometimes symbolically portrayed, by breaking the chains of helpless and passive bondsmen with the stroke of a pen. But by pronouncing slavery a moral evil that must come to an end and then winning the presidency in 1860, by refusing to compromise on the issue of slavery's expansion or on Fort Sumter, by careful leadership and timing that kept a fragile Unionist coalition together in the first year of war and committed it to emancipation in the second, by refusing to compromise this policy once he had adopted it, and by prosecuting the war to unconditional victory as commander in chief of an army of liberation, Abraham Lincoln freed the slaves.

Endnotes

¹ Robert F. Engs, "The Great American Slave Rebellion," paper delivered to the Civil War Institute at Gettysburg College, 27 June 1991, 3.

² Ira Berlin, Barbara J. Fields, Thavolia Glymph, Joseph P. Reidy, and Leslie S. Rowland, eds., *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation 1861–1867*, ser. 1, vol. 1, *The Destruction of Slavery* (Cambridge, 1985), 2.

³ Vincent Harding, *There Is a River: The Black Struggle for Freedom in America* (New York, 1981), 231, 230, 228, 235.

⁴ Berlin et al., eds., *The Destruction of Slavery*, 3.

⁵ Barbara J. Fields, "Who Freed the Slaves?" in Geoffrey C. Ward, *The Civil War: An Illustrated History* (New York, 1990), 181.

⁶ Harding, *There Is a River*, 254, 216, 223. For a similar argument, see Nathan Irvin Huggins, *Slave and Citizen: The Life of Frederick Douglass* (Boston, 1980), 77, 102–03.

⁷ Fields, "Who Freed the Slaves?" in Ward, *The Civil War*, 179, 181.

⁸ Engs, "The Great American Slave Rebellion," 13.

⁹ Roy P. Basler, ed., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 9 vols. (New Brunswick, NJ, 1951), 55, 2:255, 275–76; 3:92.

¹⁰ *Douglass' Monthly*, December 1860.

¹¹ Basler, ed., *Collected Works of Lincoln*, 4:149–51, 154, 183, 155, 172.

¹² *Ibid.*, 160.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 532.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 5:346, 350.

¹⁵ Gideon Welles, "The History of Emancipation," *The Galaxy* 14 (Dec. 1872), 842–43.

¹⁶ John G. Nicolay and John Hay, *Abraham Lincoln: A History*, 10 vols. (New York, 1890), 6:158–63.

¹⁷ Francis B. Carpenter, *Six Months at the White House with Abraham Lincoln* (New York, 1866), 76–77.

¹⁸ Basler, ed., *collected Works of Lincoln*, 7:49–50.

¹⁹ *Columbus Crisis*, 3 Aug. 1864.

²⁰ Raymond to Lincoln, 22 Aug. 1864, quoted in Basler, ed., *Collected Works of Lincoln*, 7:518.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 500, 506–07.

²² *Ibid.*, 5:421.

²³ Berlin et al., eds., *The Destruction of Slavery*, 35–36.

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Supporting Questions 2 & 3: What arguments do historians make about who ended slavery? What are the implications of the debate over who ended slavery?

Featured Source

Source B: “Who Freed the Slaves? Emancipation and Its Meaning in American Life” by Ira Berlin. Published in *Quaderni* 5 (1996): 27-34.

PASSAGE 1

Introduction: This is an excerpt from Ira Berlin’s “Who Freed the Slaves? Emancipation and Its Meaning in American Life.” In this passage, Berlin examines the agency of enslaved people to free themselves. Passage Two of this source includes the full text of this article, but the text excerpted below may be more appropriate for some classrooms or lessons.

On January 1, 1863, Abraham Lincoln promulgated his Emancipation Proclamation. A document whose grand title promised so much but whose bland words delivered so little, the Emancipation Proclamation was an enigma from the first. Contemporaries were unsure whether to condemn it as a failure of idealism or applaud it as a triumph of realpolitik, and the American people have remained similarly divided ever since. Few officially sponsored commemorations currently mark the day slaves once called “The Great Jubilee,” and, of late, black Americans have taken to celebrating their liberation on Juneteenth, a previously little-known marker of the arrival of the Union army in Texas and the liquidation of slavery in the most distant corner of the Confederacy. Unlike our other icons—the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, for example—the Emancipation Proclamation is not on regular display at the National Archives.

However, its exhibition earlier in January 1993 on the occasion of the 130th anniversary of its issuance, was and is a moment of some note. In 1993, the exhibit sent thousands of Americans into the streets, where they waited in long lines on frigid January days to see Lincoln’s handiwork. At the end of the five-day exhibit, some 30,000 had filed past the Proclamation. As visitors left the Archives’ great rotunda, the minions of Dan Rather, Bryant Gumble, and Tom Brokaw waited with microphones in hand. Before national television audiences, visitors declared themselves deeply moved by the great document. One told a reporter from the *Washington Post* that it had changed his life forever.¹

Such interest in a document whose faded words cannot be easily seen, let alone deciphered, and whose intricate logic cannot be easily unraveled, let alone comprehended, raises important questions about the role of history in the way Americans think about their racial past and present. It appears that the very inaccessibility of the Emancipation Proclamation makes Lincoln’s pronouncement a focal point for conflicting notions about America’s racial destiny. For many people, both black and white, the Proclamation bespeaks the distance the American people have travelled from the nightmarish reality of slavery—what one visitor called “a distant humiliation too painful to speak of.” For others, it

¹ *New York Times*, 20 December 1992; *Washington Post*, 30 December 1992, 1 January 1993; *Baltimore Sun*, 31 December 1992. I would like to thank Susan L. Cooper, Julie Nash, and the staff of the public affairs office of the National Archives for supplying copies of the exhibit’s press clippings.

suggests the distance that had yet to be traversed—“we have to build on the changes that started with our ancestors 130 years ago.”

But, however they viewed the Proclamation, the visitors used Lincoln’s edict as the occasion to call for rapprochement between black and white in a racially divided city, in a racially divided nation. Dismissing the notion that Lincoln embodied—rather than transcended—American racism (“The greatest honky of them all,” Julius Lester once declared), the men and women who paraded before the Proclamation saw the document as a balm. It was as if Lincoln—or his words could reach out across the ages and heal the wound. Mrs. Loretta Carter Hanes, a suburban Washington school teacher whose insistent requests to see the Proclamation had initiated the exhibit, told reporters of her hopes that the display would inaugurate another new birth of freedom.²

The public presentation of the Proclamation has also brought historians out in force. Meeting in Washington in December 1992, the American Historical Association—with more than usual forethought—convened a panel entitled “Black, White, and Lincoln.” Professor James M. McPherson of Princeton University delivered the lead paper entitled, “Who Freed the Slaves?”³ For historians, the issues involved in McPherson’s question—and by implication Lincoln’s proclamation—took on even greater weight because they represented a larger debate between those who looked to the top of the social order for cues in understanding the past and those who looked to the bottom. It was an old controversy that had previously appeared in the guise of a contest between social history and political history. Although the categories themselves had lost much of their luster in the post-structuralist age, the politically-charged debate over the very essence of the historical process has lost none its bite—at least for scholars.

The question of who freed the slaves thus not only encompassed the specific issue of responsibility for emancipation in the American South, but also resonated loudly in contemporary controversies about the role of “Great White Men” in our history books and the canon of “Great Literature” in our curriculum. McPherson’s paper and the discussion that followed reverberated with sharp condemnations and stout defenses of “great white males.” Lines between scholars who gave “workers, immigrants, [and] women,” their due and those who refused to acknowledge the “so-called ‘non-elite’” were drawn taut. “Elitist history” was celebrated and denounced.

The debate among historians, although often parochial and self-absorbed, was not without its redeeming features. For like the concerns articulated by the visitors to the National Archives, it too addressed conflicting notions about the role of high authority, on the one hand, and the actions of ordinary men and women, on the other, in shaping American society. Both the citizens who queued up outside the Archives and the scholars who debated the issue within the confines of the American Historical Association’s meeting found deep resonance in the exhibition of the Emancipation Proclamation. It gave both reason to consider the struggle for a politics (and a history) that is both appreciative of ordinary people and respectful of rightful authority in a democratic society.

The debate over origins of emancipation in the American South can be parsed in such a way as to divide historians into two camps, those who understand emancipation as the slaves’ struggle to free themselves and those who see The Great Emancipator’s hand at work. McPherson made precisely such a division. While acknowledging the role of the slaves in their own liberation, McPherson came down heavily on the side of Lincoln as the author of emancipation. He characterized the critics of Lincoln’s preeminence—advocates of what he repeatedly called the “self-emancipation thesis”—as scholarly populists whose stock in trade was a celebration of the “so-called ‘non-elite.’” Such scholars,

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McPherson implied, denied the historical role of “white males”—perhaps all regularly constituted authority—in a misguided celebration of the masses. Among those so denominated by McPherson were Robert Engs, Vincent Harding, and myself and my colleagues on the Freedmen and Southern Society Project at the University of Maryland. While other scholars were implicated, the Freedmen and Southern Society Project—“the largest scholarly enterprise on the history of emancipation”—was held responsible for elevating the “self-emancipation thesis” into what McPherson called a new orthodoxy. If such be the case, I—and I am sure the other members of the Project—am honored by the unanimity with which the Project’s work and our recent book *Free at Last* has been accepted by a profession that rarely agrees on anything. However, McPherson’s representation of the Project’s position does no justice to the arguments made in *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation*. Indeed, it is more in the nature of a caricature than a characterization.⁴

Lincoln’s proclamation, as its critics have noted, freed not a single slave who was not already entitled to freedom under legislation passed by Congress the previous year. It applied only to the slaves in territories then beyond the reach of federal authority. It specifically exempted Tennessee and Union-occupied portions of Louisiana and Virginia, and it left slavery in the loyal border states—Delaware, Maryland, Kentucky, and Missouri—untouched. Indeed, as an engine of emancipation, the Proclamation went no further than the Second Confiscation Act of July 1862, which freed all slaves who entered Union lines professing that their owners were disloyal, as well as those slaves who fell under federal control as Union troops occupied Confederate territory. Moreover, at its fullest, the Emancipation Proclamation rested upon the President’s power as commander-in-chief and was subject to constitutional challenge. Even Lincoln recognized the limitations of his ill-defined wartime authority, and, as his commitment to emancipation grew firmer in 1863 and 1864, he pressed for passage of a constitutional amendment to affirm slavery’s destruction.

⁴ Since most historical scholarship is carried on in the solitary artisan tradition, it is easy to exaggerate the numbers involved in collaborative historical research. Sad to say, “the largest scholarly enterprise on the history of emancipation” bears little resemblance to the Manhattan Project or any major research project in the social sciences. Since its inception in 1976, fewer than a dozen historians have been associated with the Project—never more than three at any one time. Besides myself, the editors of the four volumes in print are Barbara Jeane Field, Thavolia Glymph, Steven Miller, Joseph P. Reidy, Leslie S. Rowland, and Julie Saville.

The Project’s main work has been published by Cambridge University Press under the head of *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation*. Thus far four volumes are in print: *The Destruction of Slavery* (1985); *The Wartime Genesis of Free Labor: The Upper South* (1993); *The Wartime Genesis of Free Labor: The Lower South* (1991); and *The Black Military Experience* (1982). In 1992, The New Press has published an abridgement of the first four volumes entitled *Free At Last: A Documentary History of Slavery, Freedom, and the Civil War* and Cambridge has issued a volume of essays entitled *Slaves No More*.

PASSAGE 2

Introduction: This is the complete text of Ira Berlin's essay "Who Freed the Slaves? Emancipation and Its Meaning in American Life." In this essay, Berlin examines the agency of enslaved people to free themselves. Passage 1 of this source includes an excerpt of this article, but the full text included below may be more appropriate for some classrooms or lessons.

Who Freed the Slaves? Emancipation and Its Meaning in American Life

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³ The other members of the panel were William Safire of the *New York Times*, Gabor S. Boritt of Gettysburg College, David Herbert Donald of Harvard University, and my colleague at the University of Maryland, Leslie S. Rowland.

McPherson called a new orthodoxy. If such be the case, I—and I am sure the other members of the Project—am honored by the unanimity with which the Project’s work and our recent book *Free at Last* has been accepted by a profession that rarely agrees on anything. However, McPherson’s representation of the Project’s position does no justice to the arguments made in *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation*. Indeed, it is more in the nature of a caricature than a characterization.⁴

Lincoln’s proclamation, as its critics have noted, freed not a single slave who was not already entitled to freedom under legislation passed by Congress the previous year. It applied only to the slaves in territories then beyond the reach of federal authority. It specifically exempted Tennessee and Union-occupied portions of Louisiana and Virginia, and it left slavery in the loyal border states—Delaware, Maryland, Kentucky, and Missouri—untouched. Indeed, as an engine of emancipation, the Proclamation went no further than the Second Confiscation Act of July 1862, which freed all slaves who entered Union lines professing that their owners were disloyal, as well as those slaves who fell under federal control as Union troops occupied Confederate territory. Moreover, at its fullest, the Emancipation Proclamation rested upon the President’s power as commander-in-chief and was subject to constitutional challenge. Even Lincoln recognized the limitations of his ill-defined wartime authority, and, as his commitment to emancipation grew firmer in 1863 and 1864, he pressed for passage of a constitutional amendment to affirm slavery’s destruction.

What then was the point of the Proclamation? It spoke in muffled tones that heralded not the dawn of universal liberty but the compromised and piecemeal arrival of an undefined freedom. Indeed, the Proclamation’s flat prose, ridiculed by the late Richard Hofstadter as having the moral grandeur of a bill of lading, suggests that the true authorship of African-American freedom lies elsewhere—not at the top of American society but at the bottom. McPherson is correct in noting that the editors of the Freedmen and Southern Society Project seized this insight and expanded it in *Freedom*.

From the first guns at Fort Sumter, the strongest advocates of emancipation were the slaves themselves. Lacking political standing or public voice, forbidden access to the weapons of war, slaves nevertheless tossed aside the grand pronouncements of Lincoln and other Union leaders that the sectional conflict was only a war for national unity. Instead, they moved directly to put their own freedom—and that of their posterity—atop the national agenda. Steadily, as opportunities arose, slaves risked all for freedom. By abandoning their owners, coming uninvited into Union lines, and offering their assistance as laborers, pioneers, guides, and spies, slaves forced federal soldiers at the lowest level to recognize their importance to the Union’s success. That understanding travelled quickly up the chain of command. In time, it became evident even to the most obtuse federal commanders that every slave who crossed into Union lines was a double gain: one subtracted from the Confederacy and one added to the Union. The slaves’ resolute determination to secure their liberty converted many white Americans to the view that the security of the

⁴ Since most historical scholarship is carried on in the solitary artisan tradition, it is easy to exaggerate the numbers involved in collaborative historical research. Sad to say, “the largest scholarly enterprise on the history of emancipation” bears little resemblance to the Manhattan Project or any major research project in the social sciences. Since its inception in 1976, fewer than a dozen historians have been associated with the Project—never more than three at any one time. Besides myself, the editors of the four volumes in print are Barbara Jeane Field, Thavolia Glymph, Steven Miller, Joseph P. Reidy, Leslie S. Rowland, and Julie Saville.

The Project’s main work has been published by Cambridge University Press under the head of *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation*. Thus far four volumes are in print: *The Destruction of Slavery* (1985); *The Wartime Genesis of Free Labor: The Upper South* (1993); *The Wartime Genesis of Free Labor: The Lower South* (1991); and *The Black Military Experience* (1982). In 1992, The New Press has published an abridgement of the first four volumes entitled *Free At Last: A Documentary History of Slavery, Freedom, and the Civil War* and Cambridge has issued a volume of essays entitled *Slaves No More*.

Union depended upon the destruction of slavery. Eventually, this belief tipped the balance in favor of freedom, even among those who had little interest in the question of slavery and no love for black people.

Once the connection between the war and freedom had been made, slaves understood that a Union victory was imperative, and they did what they could to secure it. They threw their full weight behind the federal cause, and “tabooed” those few in their ranks who shunned the effort.⁵ More than 135,000 slave men became Union soldiers. Even deep in the Confederacy, where escape to federal lines was impossible, slaves did what they could to undermine the Confederacy and strengthen the Union—from aiding escaped Northern prisoners of war to praying for Northern military success. With their loyalty, their labor and their lives, slaves provided crucial information, muscle, and blood in support of the federal war effort. No one was more responsible for smashing the shackles of slavery than the slaves themselves.⁶

But, as the slaves realized, they could not free themselves. Nowhere in the four volumes of *Freedom* or in *Free At Last* do I or the other editors of the Freedmen and Southern Society Project claim they did. Nowhere do we use the term of “self-emancipation.” Slaves could—and they did—put the issue of freedom on the wartime agenda; they could—and they did—make certain that the question of their liberation did not disappear in complex welter of the war; they could—and they did—insure that there was no retreat from the commitment to emancipation once the issue was drawn. In short, they did what was in their power to do with the weapons they had. They could not vote, pass laws, issue field orders, or promulgate great proclamations. That was the realm of citizens, legislators, military officers, and the president. However, the actions of the slaves made it possible for citizens, legislators, military officers, and the president to act. Thus, in many ways, slaves set others in motion. Slaves were the prime moves in the emancipation drama, not the sole movers. It does no disservice to Lincoln—or to anyone else—to say that his claim to greatness rests upon his willingness to act when the moment was right.

Lincoln, as McPherson emphasizes, was no friend of slavery. He believed, as he said many times, that “if slavery is not wrong, nothing is wrong.” But, as president, Lincoln also believed he had a constitutional obligation not to interfere with slavery where it existed. Shortly before his inauguration, he offered to support a proposed constitutional amendment that would have prohibited any subsequent amendment authorizing Congress “to abolish or interfere . . . with the domestic institutions” of any state, “including slavery.”⁷ As wartime leader, he feared the disaffection of the loyal slave states, which he understood to be critical to the success of the Union. Lincoln also doubted whether white and black could live as equals in American society and thought it best for black people to remove themselves physically from the United States. Like many white Americans from Thomas Jefferson to Henry Clay, Lincoln favored the colonization of former slaves in Africa or elsewhere. At his insistence, the congressional legislation providing for the emancipation of slaves in the District of Columbia in April 1862 included an appropriation to aid the removal of liberated slaves who wished to leave the United States. Through the end of 1862, Lincoln continually connected emancipation in the border states to the colonization of slaves somewhere beyond the borders of the United States.⁸

Where others led on emancipation, Lincoln followed. Lincoln responded slowly to demands for emancipation as they worked their way up the military chain of command and as they echoed in Northern public opinion. He revoked the field emancipations of Union generals John C. Fremont in August 1861 and David Hunter in May 1862, who invoked

⁵ See, for example, *The Wartime Genesis of Free Labor: The Upper South*, doc. 7.

⁶ The argument is laid out in full in *The Destruction of Slavery*.

⁷ For the proposed amendment, see Edward McPherson, *The Political History of the United States of America during the Great Rebellion*, 2nd ed., Washington, 1865, 59; Abraham Lincoln, *Collected Works*, ed. Roy P. Basler, 9 vols., New Brunswick, N.J., 1953–55, vol. 4, pp. 421–41.

⁸ Lincoln, *Collected Works*, vol. 5, pp. 29–31, 317–19.

martial law to liberate slaves in Missouri and South Carolina, respectively. Through the first year and a half of war, Lincoln—preoccupied with the loyalty of the slaveholding states within the Union and hopeful for the support of Whiggish slaveholders within the Confederacy—remained respectful of the rights of the master.

As pressure for emancipation grew in the spring of 1862, Lincoln continued to urge gradual, compensated emancipation. The compensation would be to slaveholders for property lost, not to slaves for labor stolen. In late September 1862, even while announcing that he would proclaim emancipation on January 1 if the rebellious states did not return to the Union, he continued to call for gradual, compensated emancipation in the border states and compensation for loyal slaveholders elsewhere. The preliminary emancipation proclamation also reiterated his support for colonizing freed slaves “upon this continent or elsewhere.”⁹ As black laborers became essential to the Union war effort and as demands to enlist black men in the federal army mounted, the pressure for emancipation became inexorable. On January 1, 1863, Lincoln fulfilled his promise to free all slaves in the states still in rebellion. Had another Republican been in Lincoln’s place, that person doubtless would have done the same. Without question, some would have acted more expeditiously and with greater bravado. Without question, some would have acted more cautiously with lesser resolve. In the end, Lincoln did what needed to be done. Thus, when Lincoln finally acted, he moved with confidence and determination. He stripped the final Emancipation Proclamation of any reference to compensation for former slaveholders or colonization for former slaves. He added provisions that allowed for the service of black men in the Union army and navy. The Proclamation opened the door to the eventual enlistment of nearly 190,000 black men—most of them former slaves. Military enlistment became the surest solvent of slavery, extending to places the Emancipation Proclamation did not reach, especially the loyal slave states. Once slave men entered the Union army, they were free and they made it clear they expected their families to be free too. In March, 1865, Congress confirmed this understanding and provided for the freedom of the immediate families of all black soldiers. Lincoln’s actions, however tardy, gave force to all that the slaves had risked. The Emancipation Proclamation transformed the war in ways only the President could. After January 1, 1863, the Union army was an army of liberation and Lincoln was its commander.

Lincoln understood the importance of his role, both politically and morally—just as the slaves had understood theirs. Having determined to free the slaves, Lincoln declared he would not take back the Emancipation Proclamation even when military failure and political reverses threatened that policy. He praised the role of black soldiers in preserving the Union and liquidating chattel bondage. The growing presence of black men in Union ranks deepened Lincoln’s commitment to emancipation. Lincoln later suggested that black soldiers might have the vote, perhaps his greatest concession to racial equality.¹⁰ To secure the freedom that his Proclamation had promised, Lincoln promoted passage of the Thirteenth Amendment, although he did not live to see its ratification.

The Emancipation Proclamation’s place in the drama of emancipation is thus secure—as is Lincoln’s. To deny it is to ignore the intense struggle by which freedom arrived. It is to ignore the Union soldiers who sheltered slaves, the abolitionists who stumped for emancipation, and the thousands of men and women who like Lincoln changed their minds as slaves made the case for universal liberty. Reducing the Emancipation Proclamation to a nullity and Lincoln to a cipher denies human agency as fully as writing the slaves out of the struggle for freedom.

⁹ *U.S., Statutes at Large*, vol. 12, pp. 1267–68.

¹⁰ “I barely suggest for your private consideration,” Lincoln wrote to the Unionist governor of Louisiana in March 1864, “whether some of the colored people may not be let in [to the suffrage]—as, for instance, the very intelligent, and especially those who have fought gallantly in our ranks. They would probably help,” he added, “in some trying times to come, to keep the jewel of liberty within the family of freedom.” Lincoln, *Collected Works*, vol. 7, p. 243.

Both Lincoln and the slaves played their appointed parts in the drama of emancipation. From an historian's perspective, denying their complementary roles limits understanding of the complex interaction of human agency and events which resulted in slavery's demise. The Freedmen and Southern Society Project has sought to restore the fullness of the history of emancipation by expanding the terrain upon which it should be understood, emphasizing—and documenting—the process by which freedom arrived. While the editors argue that the slaves were in fact the prime movers of emancipation, nowhere do they deny Lincoln's centrality to the events that culminated in universal freedom. In fact, rather than single out slaves or exclude Lincoln (as the term "self-emancipation" implies), the editors argue for the significance of others as well: white Union soldiers—few of them racial egalitarians—who saw firsthand how slavery weakened the Union cause; their families and friends in the North—eager for federal victory—who learned from these soldiers the strength the Confederate regime drew from bonded labor; the Northern men and women—most of them with no connection to the abolition movement—who acted upon such news to petition Congress; and the congressmen and senators who eventually moved in favor of freedom. This roster, of course, does not include all of those involved in the social and political process that ended slavery in the American South. It omits the slaveholders, no bit players in the drama. Taken as a whole, however, the Project's work does suggest something of the complexity of emancipation and the limitation of seeing slavery's end as the product of any one individual—or element—in the social order.

Emphasizing that emancipation was not the work of one hand underscores the force of contingency—the crooked course by which universal freedom arrived. It captures the ebb and flow of events which, at times, placed Lincoln among the opponents of emancipation and then propelled him to the forefront of freedom's friends. It emphasizes the clash of wills that is the essence of politics—whether it involves enfranchised legislators or voteless slaves. Politics, perforce, necessitate an on-the-ground struggle among different interests, not the unfolding of a single idea or perspective—whether that of an individual or an age. Lincoln, no less than the meanest slave, acted upon changing possibilities as he understood them. The very same events—secession and war—that gave the slaves' actions new meaning also gave Lincoln's actions new meaning. To think that Lincoln could have anticipated these changes—or, more strangely still, somehow embodied them—imbues him with power over the course of events that no human being has every enjoyed. Lincoln was part of history, not above it. Whatever he believed about slavery, in 1861 Lincoln did not see the war as an instrument of emancipation. The slaves did. Lincoln's commitment to emancipation changed with time because it had to. The slaves' commitment to universal freedom did not waver because it could not.

Complexity—contrary to McPherson—is not ambivalence or ambiguity. To tell the whole story—to follow that crooked course—does not diminish the clarity of an argument or mystify it into a maze of “nuances, paradox, or irony.” Telling the entire tale is not a form of obscuration. If done right, it clarifies precisely because it consolidates the mass of competing claims under a single head. Elegance or simplicity of argument is only useful when it encompasses all of the evidence, not when it excludes or narrows it.

In a season when constituted authority once again tries to find the voice of the people and when the people are testing the measure of their leaders, it is well to recall the relationship of both to securing freedom's greatest victory. In this sense, slaves were right in celebrating January 1, 1863, as the Day of Jubilee. As Loretta Hanes noted 130 years later, “It meant so much to people because it was a ray of light, the hope of a new day coming. And it gave them courage.”¹¹ Indeed, the Emancipation Proclamation reminds us all—both those viewing its faded pages and those who studied it—that real change both derives from the actions of the people and that it requires the imprimatur of constituted authority. It teaches that “social” history is no less political than “political” history—for it too rests upon the bending of wills, which is the essence of politics—and that no political process is determined by a single individual. If the

¹¹ *USA Today*, 30 December 1992.

Emancipation Proclamation speaks to the central role of constituted authority—in this case Abraham Lincoln—in making history, it speaks no less loudly to the role of ordinary men and women, seizing the moment to make the world according to their own understanding of justice and human decency. The connection between the two should not be forgotten as we try to rebuild American politics—and try to write a history worthy of that politics.

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Summative Performance Task

Compelling Question

Does it matter who ended slavery?

Summative Performance Task

Does it matter who ended slavery? Construct an argument (e.g., detailed outline, poster or essay) that addresses the compelling question using specific claims and relevant evidence from historical sources while acknowledging competing views.

ARGUMENT

At this point in the inquiry, students have examined the timeline of emancipation, looked at arguments claiming that Lincoln emancipated enslaved people and that enslaved people emancipated themselves and considered the implications of those arguments. Students should be able to demonstrate the breadth of their understandings and their abilities to use evidence from multiple sources to support their claims. In this task, students construct an evidence-based argument responding to the compelling question “Does it matter who ended slavery?” It is important to note that students’ arguments could take a variety of forms, including a detailed outline, poster or essay.

Students’ arguments likely will vary, but could include any of the following:

- The debate over who ended slavery matters because it’s important that we have an accurate understanding of key figures and events from our past.
- The debate over who ended slavery matters because the agency of African Americans is often missing from history, and Berlin and others correct the misperception that African Americans passively achieved emancipation.
- This debate over who ended slavery does not matter because it’s clear that both Lincoln and enslaved people played significant roles in emancipation; who did more does not actually matter.

EXTENSION

Students could extend their study of the debate over who ended slavery by examining how a school textbook tells the story of emancipation. Using their arguments as a foundation, students could propose revisions to the textbook’s version of this historical event and submit those revisions to the textbook publisher.

Taking Informed Action

Compelling Question	Does it matter who ended slavery?
Taking Informed Action	<p>UNDERSTAND Watch the film <i>Lincoln</i>.</p> <p>ASSESS Using evidence generated from the inquiry as support, discuss the extent to which the film accurately depicts the end of slavery.</p> <p>ACT Write a review of <i>Lincoln</i> and post it to www.IMDB.com.</p>

Students have the opportunity to take informed action by drawing on their knowledge of the debate over who freed enslaved people and compare that to depictions of Abraham Lincoln.

To understand, students will view the film *Lincoln* (2012). They show their ability to assess by using the knowledge gathered during the inquiry to assess how accurately the film addresses Lincoln's role in emancipation. And they act by writing a movie review and posting that review to IMDB.com.