
Book-jacket blurbs proclaim Allen C. Guelzo’s *Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation* “without question the greatest book yet written about Lincoln’s greatest act,” “the most accurate account ever published on . . . Lincoln’s greatest achievement,” and a “definitive study.” Such lavish praise raises expectations few books can meet, including this one. Guelzo’s prize-winning biography, *Abraham Lincoln: Redeemer President* (1999), condensed discussion of emancipation into a few pages. The new volume expands the topic in a brief interpretative introduction and five substantial, expertly narrated chapters that chronicle Lincoln’s shrewd deployment of presidential power to end slavery in the context of wartime opportunities.

Two main themes lace the narrative: first, from the outset of his presidency Lincoln intended to end slavery; second, he prudently took advantage of the exigencies of war to maneuver the nation toward his moral goal. Both themes claim the Proclamation as Lincoln’s for reasons more profound than just because he signed it. Guelzo’s argument defends the morality and prudence of the Proclamation against Richard Hofstadter’s criticism that it “had all the moral grandeur of a bill of lading.” (Guelzo chides Hofstadter for not even understanding that a bill of lading was “a surprisingly important commercial document in the antebellum economy” [2]). Guelzo also reasserts Lincoln’s responsibility for emancipation in response to Ira Berlin, Barbara Fields, and other historians who have declared that slaves emancipated themselves and forced Lincoln to recognize their de facto freedom. To Lerone Bennett’s claim that Lincoln was a white supremacist enemy of emancipation, Guelzo counters that “It would be special pleading to claim that Lincoln was in the end the most perfect friend black Americans have ever had,” adding, “but it would also be the
cheapest and most ignorant of skepticisms to deny that he was the most significant” (11).

Guelzo probably means that Lincoln was black Americans’ most significant white friend. Even that accolade is arguable, not least because significance takes many forms. Guelzo evidently means that Lincoln was the most significant white friend of black Americans because he was president and had the will, authority, and power to proclaim emancipation. Such a view of emancipation from the White House down reclaims Lincoln as the authentic Great Emancipator. It also minimizes the massive, chaotic social process of emancipation that involved millions of people, soldiers and civilians, slaves and masters, Yanks and Rebs. That process, Guelzo suggests, was set in motion by Lincoln, the Prime Mover of both the Proclamation and the legal termination of slavery in America, which came eight months after Lincoln’s murder.

Perhaps the most controversial argument advanced by Guelzo is that “Lincoln’s face was set toward the goal of emancipation from the day he first took the presidential oath,” March 4, 1861 (4). A few pages later Guelzo claims that Lincoln’s determination to end slavery dated almost ten months before his inauguration “from the day of his nomination for the presidency,” May 18, 1860 (24). In support of the earlier date, Guelzo cites the postwar remarks of five of Lincoln’s friends, raising the serious question of whether their comments were distorted by Union victory, emancipation, and Lincoln’s assassination. Convincing evidence that Lincoln was committed in May 1860 to pursue emancipation if elected president needs to come not from recollections of Lincoln’s friends six years and more after the fact, but from Lincoln himself in 1860 and 1861.

A crippling liability with the argument that Lincoln was emancipation-bound in May 1860 or March 1861 is that Lincoln’s writings and speeches at the time say just the opposite—explicitly and repeatedly. Again and again Lincoln promised, as he put it in his first inaugural address, “I have no purpose, directly or indirectly, to interfere with the institution of slavery in the States where it exists. I believe I have no lawful right to do so, and I have no inclination to do so.” Lincoln followed this unambiguous statement that he did not have an emancipationist card up his inaugural coat-sleeve by professing, “I take the official oath today, with no mental reservations, and with no purpose to construe the Constitution or laws, by any hypercritical rules.” This declaration was no meaningless rhetorical gesture. Near the end of his inaugural address, Lincoln announced that he had “no objection” to the Thirteenth Amendment recently sent to the states with two-thirds
majorities from the House and Senate. The proposed amendment guaranteed that the federal government would never interfere with slavery in the states. Lincoln explained that because he believed “such a provision to now be implied constitutional law,” he had “no objection to its being made express, and irrevocable.” Irrevocable. No matter how one squints at Lincoln’s own words, they do not reveal that his face was set toward emancipation on inaugural day. Instead, Lincoln said—and there is no credible reason to doubt him—that he looked forward to preserving the Union as it was when he took office, with slavery in the states where it existed.

Despite Lincoln’s avowals to the contrary, Guelzo argues that “The most salient feature to emerge from the sixteen months between his inauguration and the first presentation of the Proclamation to his cabinet on July 22, 1862, is the consistency with which Lincoln’s face was set toward the goal of emancipation from the day he first took the presidential oath” (4). Guelzo maintains that “Emancipation, for Lincoln, was never a question of the end but of how to construct the means in such a way that the end was not put into jeopardy” (25). For Lincoln, unlike red-hot abolitionists and others impatient for a death-blow against slavery, “‘obeying the dictates of prudence’ was as important . . . as obeying ‘the obligations of law’” (4). Guelzo elevates prudence to the lofty plane of Lincoln’s reverence for the law, the constitution, and what Lincoln termed “cold, calculated, unimpassioned reason.” Guelzo opines that “the most important among the Enlightenment’s political virtues for Lincoln, and for his Proclamation was prudence.” In fact prudence holds “the key to Lincoln’s political behavior [that] gives us the ‘big picture’ behind the Emancipation Proclamation” (3, 7).

By prudence, Guelzo means in part Lincoln’s unquestionable skill as a canny, wise politician presiding over an unruly, hodge-podge coalition of Republicans not to mention a nation riven by party, race, secession, and war. Guelzo deftly chronicles Lincoln’s refusal to permit emancipation initiatives by General John C. Frémont in Missouri and General David Hunter in South Carolina, as well as his concerted attempts to cajole slave states still in the Union to adopt his plan for gradual, compensated emancipation with colonization of the freed people to some foreign shore. This story is well known to students of Lincoln and well documented in Lincoln’s writings and speeches, and Guelzo tells it gracefully.

Guelzo departs from the conventional account in two important ways, both outgrowths of his emphasis on Lincoln’s prudence. First, Guelzo interprets Lincoln’s offer of gradual, compensated emanci-
pation and the Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation as prudent, irreversible strides toward his true goal of complete, nationwide emancipation: they were the available, prudent means to reach his ultimate moral destination.

Once again, Lincoln’s writings and speeches at the time strongly suggest that Guelzo has put the cart of emancipation before the horse of Lincoln’s intentions. Most historians view Lincoln’s actions before January 1, 1863—when he signed the Emancipation Proclamation—as attempts not to hustle the nation along the road toward the elimination of bondage but rather to maintain the Union by cementing the loyalty of border slave states, by appealing to what he considered the silent majority of white Unionists within the states in rebellion, and by reassuring northern Democrats that he was making war against the rebellion rather than against slavery or the constitution. At least in my reading, Guelzo seems to view the emancipationist prudence of Lincoln’s pre-1863 actions toward slavery through the lens of post-1865, post-emancipation hindsight. The evidence is overwhelming that Lincoln hoped his pre-1863 actions towards slavery would succeed in ending the rebellion and saving the Union. If his plans had succeeded and his hopes had been realized, slavery would have been saved along with the Union, at least for the duration of Lincoln’s presidency and probably long afterward. Guelzo’s insistence on Lincoln’s pre-1863 emancipationist prudence strikes me as unsustainably teleological. It charts a straight line backward from the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment in December 1865 to Lincoln’s nomination for the presidency in May 1860. To claim that Lincoln toed that line before 1863 in order to arrive at its end point in 1865 seems to credit Lincoln with prescience unsupported by his words and deeds at that time.

Guelzo’s second departure from conventional accounts is to align Lincoln’s prudence with providence. Acknowledging Lincoln’s “vague religious profile,” Guelzo declares that, “Lincoln nevertheless understood that a significant part of the politics of prudence involved deference to providence” (6). The Emancipation Proclamation “was one of the biggest political gambles in American history,” Guelzo argues, but “Lincoln’s gamble may be considered a prudent one for the role that providence came to play in it” (6). During the war, Lincoln’s view of providence veered “toward the providence of a mysterious and self-concealing God,” and “Lincoln came to see the Proclamation as the only alternative God had left to emancipation being swept off the table entirely” (7).

Guelzo erects his interpretative edifice of the divine inspiration of Lincoln’s Proclamation on a fragile evidentiary foundation. Guelzo
focuses on the cabinet meeting of September 22, 1862, when Lincoln announced his decision to issue the Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation. The best contemporary account of Lincoln’s statement to the cabinet is the diary entry written that evening by Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles. Lincoln, Welles reported, “remarked that he had made a vow, a covenant, that if God gave us the victory in the approaching battle, he would consider it an indication of Divine will, and that it was his duty to move forward in the cause of emancipation. It might be thought strange, he said, that he had in this way submitted the disposal of matters when the way was not clear to his mind what he should do. God had decided this question in favor of the slaves. He was satisfied it was right, was confirmed and strengthened in his action by the vow and the results” (Diary of Gideon Welles [1911], 1:143). Secretary of the Treasury Samuel Chase noted a similar but less detailed remark in his diary. Guelzo also cites artist Francis B. Carpenter’s recollection of what Chase told him Lincoln had said, as reported by Isaac Arnold, who did not attend the cabinet meeting (The History of Abraham Lincoln [1866], 295–96). This thirdhand account bears little weight, especially since Arnold cites it in a footnote to underscore his claim that Lincoln’s decision to issue the Preliminary Proclamation was lifted on the wings of prayers by millions of antislavery people and by Lincoln himself “seeking prayerfully the guidance of Almighty God” (Arnold, 288–95). The word prayer never appears in Welles’s diary entry, suggesting that Arnold bathed Lincoln’s cabinet meeting in a divine glow not evident to those present.

While there is no reason to doubt that Lincoln said more or less what Welles and Chase jotted in their diaries, there is reason to wonder whether those words meant, as Guelzo declares, that Lincoln committed “the nation, to outright emancipation on the strength of a sign he had asked from God, as though it were the Emperor Constantine or Oliver Cromwell rather than Abraham Lincoln sitting at the head of the cabinet table” (153). Guelzo provides an authoritative account of the July 22, 1862, cabinet meeting when Lincoln first announced his plan to issue an emancipation proclamation, but, on Secretary of State William Seward’s advice, decided to wait for enough of a Union military victory to make it appear an act of statesmanship rather than desperation. According to Guelzo and other Lincoln scholars, Lincoln told his cabinet in July that he had already “resolved” to adopt an “emancipation policy” and that he did not seek the cabinet’s opinions about whether he should do it, since that “was settled in his own mind” (118).

Guelzo says nothing about Lincoln getting or seeking a sign from
God in July, and there is no evidence that he did. Unless one were to argue that Lincoln changed his mind about emancipation after July 22 and then was swayed by a sign from God to return to his previous resolution—and there is no evidence that he did change his mind about emancipation between July 22 and September 22, nor does Guelzo argue that he did—then Lincoln’s statement about divine will in the September meeting appears far less decisive than Guelzo asserts. It appears less a profession of divine inspiration or authorization for the Emancipation Proclamation than an invocation of divine favor for a decision Lincoln had already taken, except for determining its timing and final form. In effect, it seems to me, Lincoln was telling his cabinet that the Antietam victory—such as it was—suggested that God was aboard the president’s emancipation bandwagon. When Lincoln issued the final Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863, he concluded, “upon this act, sincerely believed to be an act of justice, warranted by the Constitution, upon military necessity, I invoke the considerate judgment of mankind, and the gracious favor of Almighty God,” a statement less resonant of Constantine or Cromwell than of a master politician claiming the support of all right-thinking people and the favor of God (280). Given what Lincoln wrote in the Proclamation and what he said in the July and September cabinet meetings, Guelzo’s claim that “Lincoln came to see the Proclamation as the only alternative God had left to emancipation being swept off the table entirely” seems an unwarranted assertion of a faith-based inspiration for emancipation (7).

Guelzo’s emphasis on Lincoln’s determination to end slavery from the moment of his presidential nomination and on his prudence in maneuvering toward that end tends to make the war subsidiary to emancipation rather than vice versa. Guelzo persuasively chronicles the influence of the war on Lincoln’s emancipation policy and his determination to protect the freedom of the emancipated. Guelzo is particularly informative in explaining Lincoln’s worry about the ultimate judicial fate of emancipation. He also offers an excellent analysis of the shift from an apparent tolerance of slave insurrections in the Preliminary Proclamation to the final Proclamation’s caution enjoining “the people so declared to be free to abstain from all violence, unless in necessary self-defence” (260). Guelzo does not give comparable attention to the next clause of the Proclamation in which Lincoln “recommends” to slaves that, “in all cases when allowed, they labor faithfully for reasonable wages” (260), missing an opportunity to explore the limitations of Lincoln’s emancipation policy as thoroughly as its achievements.
Guelzo concludes by quoting Frederick Douglass’s 1876 assessment of Lincoln: “Measuring him by the sentiment of his country, a sentiment he was bound to consult, he was swift, zealous, radical, and determined” about emancipation (250). Guelzo ably defends such an appreciation. But both Douglass and Guelzo seem to be judging Lincoln by an emancipationist yardstick that scants his own calculus of means and ends. Lincoln’s words and deeds make it impossible to doubt, it seems to me, that his goal was to save the Union and his means were to fight the war in whatever ways were necessary to reach that goal, including issuing the Emancipation Proclamation and upholding it until his death. It is true, as Guelzo admirably shows, that the war made emancipation possible. But if Lincoln could have saved the Union and fought and won the war without emancipation, he would have done it, just as he said in his famous letter to Horace Greeley of August 22, 1862: “My paramount object in this struggle is to save the Union and is not either to save or to destroy slavery. If I could save the Union without freeing any slave I would do it, and if I could save it by freeing all the slaves I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone I would also do that. What I do about slavery, and the colored race, I do because I believe it helps to save the Union; and what I forbear, I forbear because I do not believe it would help to save the Union.” Lincoln claimed his war to save the Union required his Emancipation Proclamation, and he acted accordingly.

In his second inaugural address, Lincoln attributed the “mighty scourge of war” to God’s judgment of the nation for the injustice of slavery. Lincoln’s eloquence masked his own responsibility for the war, which he did far more than “accept,” as he claimed in his speech. Lincoln did not start the war, but he did refuse to stop it until rebel armies were defeated. In order to keep fighting the war, he issued the Emancipation Proclamation. Lincoln’s policy of Union through war, not signs from God, required emancipation. Lincoln’s greatest achievement was to save the Union through relentless, bloody, costly war that—in his judgment—eventually required “freeing some [slaves] and leaving others alone.” In the big picture of emancipation, war—not prudence—stands front and center.