The Shifting Terrain of Attitudes Toward Abraham Lincoln and Emancipation

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The Mount Rushmore profile of a steadfast Abraham Lincoln gazes stoically, while the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., exudes cool, impervious steadiness. In some ways, these rock-solid memorials contrast with the instability of Americans’ attitudes toward Lincoln. He was personally wary of excessive emotion yet capable of eliciting intensely emotional reactions, and attitudes toward him have changed volatilley, both during and since the Civil War. Yet rocks themselves are constantly melting down, crystallizing, combining with new elements, deteriorating a grain at a time, shattering, and transforming under pressure. Attitudes toward Abraham Lincoln, the leader who oversaw a democratic society through a convulsive war that ended slavery, have changed dramatically and along a clear time line. Views of Lincoln roiled like magma during the crisis of Civil War, proving to be volatile and unstable among even his own allies. In the wake of the president’s assassination, views crystallized suddenly and divisively along regional and racial lines like erupted lava solidifying instantly when it meets cold air or water, and then fracturing sharply along clear and definite fault lines. But time did not stop in 1865. Since then the very clear positions articulated by Union soldiers, white northern civilians, black Americans, and white Confederates in the spring of 1865 have fragmented, diverged, and shifted, much as the very surface of the earth breaks down and blows about when buffeted by wind, rain, and time.

Although a clear time line with key turning points that can help us think systematically about the evolution of Americans’ opinions about the sixteenth president offers a modestly novel way of thinking about a perennial subject, the fundamental insight that Americans have changed their minds about Lincoln will hardly strike readers of this journal as breaking news. The real question worth pondering is, Why have views changed so dramatically, at particular times, and
in particular ways? Undoubtedly, numerous elements contribute to the emotional intensity and change over time, but chief among them is the realization that views of Lincoln are inextricably bound up with views of his relationship to emancipation, and both emancipation and Lincoln’s role in it are inherently volatile topics. The shifts are therefore all but inevitable, and they have meaning worth pondering. To put the point another way, squabbling over whose views of Lincoln are right and wrong is a bit like assigning blame for the Grand Canyon or the Rocky Mountains. If we all focus our attention on whose fault those pesky rocks are, then we would miss the beauty of course, but we would also lose chances to consider what the layers and outcroppings tell us about how the earth forms and changes. Similarly, changes in the landscape of attitudes toward Lincoln do not result merely from personal quirks in the eye of the beholder but are themselves historically instructive and inherent to the metamorphic process of emancipation.

Because Lincoln now so regularly makes the list of top three presidents, it is easy to lose sight of how controversial and at times downright unpopular he was while in office. Even among members of his own Republican Party, let alone non-Republican northerners, Lincoln would be hard pressed to name steadfast supporters at various points during the Civil War. In the first half of 1864, his own party seriously considered ousting him from the presidential ticket for the upcoming election. It goes without saying that he was not exactly beloved by white southerners in the years 1861 to 1865.

But one group did embrace the president in astonishingly high numbers throughout the war—Union soldiers. In fact, Union troops’ affections for the president ran so deep that many referred to him in explicitly familial language such as “Uncle Abraham,” “Uncle Abe,” and “Father Abraham.” As early as 1862, when General George

McClellan’s popularity among his troops was at its highest pitch, Sergeant Felix Brannigan reported that Lincoln surpassed even Little Mac among enlisted men. “Old Abe . . . is the soldier’s friend, and the man above all men in the right place,” Brannigan told his sister. In spite of McClellan’s good standing, Brannigan claimed that even the general’s “popularity among the soldiers . . . will never measure the 1/100th part of Honest Old Abe’s.” Over the course of the war, that bond only strengthened.

Traditionally, we have assumed that Union soldiers’ admiration for Lincoln resulted from such likable qualities as compassion, humor, and accessibility, which men in the ranks observed firsthand when the president visited troops in the field or when soldiers visited the White House. This interpretation certainly has merit, as far as it goes. Lincoln’s visits to the Army of the Potomac did convince men in the field that, as Brannigan put it, “he takes an interest in us,” and the open door policy that Lincoln maintained while in the White House did appeal to the egalitarian streak that ran strongly through Union troops. For example, one New York Democrat who opposed Lincoln politically still admired the president for seeing to it that “Every person has a right to go through these rooms.”

But the conventional explanation tells only part of the story, for two main reasons. First, while Union soldiers in the Army of the Potomac enjoyed opportunities to see Lincoln firsthand or to be visited by him, no soldiers outside Washington, D.C., or Virginia did, and Lincoln was


just as beloved by men who never set eyes on him as he was by those who met him personally. Second, while many appreciated Lincoln’s concern for their well-being, comforting platitudes and empty words of praise would not have been enough to secure such remarkable esteem and allegiance. As the war intensified, soldiers wanted more than a cheerleader or caretaker, as the Democratic Party learned to its sorrow when George McClellan ran against Lincoln for president in 1864. The final plank of the 1864 Democratic Party’s platform read: “RESOLVED. That the sympathy of the Democratic party is heartily and earnestly extended to the soldiery of our army and sailors of our navy, who are and have been in the field and on the sea under the flag of our country, and in the event of its attaining power, they will receive all the care, protection, and regard that the brave soldiers and sailors of the republic have so nobly deserved.”

Instead of welcoming the solicitude, members of the Union army ridiculed it. “They might as well try to catch fish with a naked hook—just as if all our soldiers wanted was ‘care, protection, regard,’ and kindness,” an Illinois soldier mocked contemptuously. “Away with such hypocrisy! Our brave soldiers will spit upon such a platform and scorn the miserable tricksters and demagogues who profess to be their friends.” Plainly, “care, protection, and regard” do not by themselves account sufficiently for Union troops’ loyalty to Lincoln.

Then why did soldiers hold such strong positive views about their commander in chief? Soldiers liked Lincoln not for simple reasons but because he saw the war as they did, and that vision was none too simple. It responded to the experiences of war, and it came to link the war, Union, and emancipation together in ways that are crucial to our understanding of Lincoln’s stature among this crucial segment of the population.

The particular vision of the war that soldiers credited Lincoln with sharing consisted of several parts. First, both Lincoln and the Union rank-and-file insisted that they fought to preserve liberty and freedom as universal ideals applicable to all humanity and that the survival of self-government and republican principles everywhere in the world depended upon the survival of the Union. In July 1861 soldiers like the Union men stationed in Martinsburg, Virginia, explained that the Union must be preserved in order to certify the success of “the experiment of

our popular government.” That success mattered for more than just Americans, as Indiana private W.D. Wildman saw it, because “the Union is not only the citadel of our liberty, but the depository [sic] of the hopes of the human race.” Even in the spring and summer of 1864, when Union morale hit one of its lowest points, soldiers like Corporal George Cadman urged his wife to remember that if he was hurt or killed, “it will be not only for my Country and my Children but for Liberty all over the World . . . for if Liberty should be crushed here, what hope would there be for the cause of Human progress anywhere else?”

Lincoln echoed soldiers’ convictions about the worldwide import of the survival of the Union. In his first Message to Congress, the president affirmed that the war “embraces more than the fate of these United States. It presents to the whole family of man, the question, whether a constitutional republic, or a democracy—a government of the people, by the same people—can, or cannot, maintain its territorial integrity, against its own domestic foes.” Throughout the war, Lincoln returned to this theme. In the Gettysburg Address he reminded listeners that “our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal,” and that “now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure.” One reason soldiers so respected Lincoln was that such sentiments closely resembled their own views of the worldwide significance of the Union and the war.

But it wasn’t just about the Union for soldiers, and as the stubborn war dragged on, they also credited Lincoln with sharing their perception of the relationship between the Union, slavery, emancipation, and the war in several key ways. First, soldiers were quick to identify slavery as the issue most responsible for instigating the war. As a Wisconsin soldiers’ camp newspaper put it, “the fact that slavery is the sole undeniable cause of this infamous rebellion, that it is a war of,

8. Pvt. W.D. Wildman, 12th Indiana, to teacher, Miss Susan Griggs, November 2, 1861, Virginia Southwood Collection, Western Historical Manuscript Collection, University of Missouri, Columbia.
9. Cpl. George Cadman, 39th Ohio, to wife, March 6, 1864, George Hovey Cadman Letters, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville.
by, and for Slavery, is as plain as the noon-day sun.”  

It took Lincoln longer to make similar claims publicly, but by his second inauguration, the president freely echoed the men in the ranks when he noted that “slaves constituted a peculiar and powerful interest” and that “all knew that this interest was, somehow, the cause of the war.”

From there soldiers drew the logical conclusion that if one wanted to end the war and save the Union, one had to get rid of the problem that started the war and threatened the Union in the first place, and that was slavery. Men like Private Jacob Behm of Illinois insisted that “Slavery is the sole cause of the rebellion” and that made it our “political, civil, moral, and sacred duty” to end slavery unequivocally because any “compromise” in the matter “would give but a breathing spell for a renewed struggle.” Even more succinctly, Missourian John Boucher declared that since “it was slavery that caused the war,” it would take “the eternal overthrow of slavery” to win the war. When men like Behm, Boucher, and countless others heard their president proclaim, as Lincoln did in December 1862, that “in giving freedom to the slave, we assure freedom to the free” and that “the last, best hope of earth” for republican self-government rested with the Union’s willingness to strike at slavery, they witnessed their own views receiving official sanction. When Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, some soldiers objected, but for many more the Proclamation’s casting of slavery’s destruction as a military necessity seemed to validate their understanding of the best way to win the war and accomplish its goals. “The late proclamation of the President makes it a war on Slavery,” Levi Hines wrote triumphantly, glad that finally Lincoln saw the necessity of “fighting for the purpose of ending that hellish curse of our country.”

Because they spent time in the South and witnessed slavery at work there, many Union soldiers saw precise strategic benefits to emancipation, and they credited Lincoln with also grasping those benefits. One cavalryman explained to readers at home that slavery enlarged

12. The Wisconsin Volunteer, February 6, 1862, p. 3, Kansas State Historical Society. The Wisconsin Volunteer was the paper of the 13th Wisconsin.
15. Pvt. John Boucher, 10th Missouri, to wife, December 7, 1861, Boucher Family Papers, Civil War Miscellany Collection 2nd Series.
the Confederate army by permitting a staggering proportion of white southern men to join the ranks while “their negroes are at home raising crops to support their families.” Free the slaves, and “the white men will be obliged to come home to look after the welfare of their families and go to work themselves or starve.” Lincoln made similar points. In his December 1862 Message to Congress, he advocated emancipation because it “would shorten the war,” and in his December 1863 Message to Congress he again stated that emancipation was “aiding in the suppression of the rebellion.”

The experiences of witnessing slavery in the South and of enduring a terrible war also convinced many Union soldiers that, beyond simply helping to save the Union, emancipation would improve the Union into something worthy of saving, and they believed that Lincoln, too, began to grasp the ideological as well as practical imperative for ending slavery. In the summer of 1862 a Kansas private wondered “if all this untold expense of blood and treasure, of toil and suffering, of want and sacrifice, of grief and mourning is . . . to result in no greater good than the restoration of the Union as it was, what will it amount to?” The sacrifices of war would “result in no real and lasting good” unless “the rights of human nature and universal human freedom” became realities, and they could only do that with the abolition of slavery. Lincoln seemed to begin to grasp the need for dramatic change in his December 1862 Message to Congress, when he asserted that “the dogmas of the quiet past, are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with difficulty, and we must rise with the occasion. As our case is new, so must we think anew, and act anew.”

Lincoln’s final Emancipation Proclamation in January struck many Union soldiers as the logical culmination of that insight. In the depths of the Union’s bleak winter of 1863, a Vermont corporal assured his parents that “behind the dark clouds of imbecility, apathy, treachery, treason & rebellion I can see the silver lining,” because thanks to the
“great proclamation of President Lincoln Jan. 1st . . . human liberty is to be planted on a firmer basis than ever before.” An Ohioan agreed that “the Union under the old construction” would never do because men like him now believed in the need for “a new one, that knows nothing about slavery.” Such sentiments anticipated Lincoln’s powerful call for “a new birth of freedom” in the Gettysburg Address delivered later that same year and help explain the affinity so many Union troops felt for their commander in chief. As Ransom Bedell cheered in a missive to his cousin, “we are not for the Union as it was But as it will Be. . . . ‘Hurrah’ for A. Lincoln.”

One of the most notable things about such sentiments is how sharply they differed from men’s views before the war, and the trajectory of change, too, holds part of the key to understanding why troops felt so strongly about Lincoln. “I came in to the army oppose[d] to having any thing to do with the negro, and thought I was one of the last men to meddle with them,” admitted an Illinoisan. By 1863 he could only marvel, “what a change,” as he insisted that the Union simply must “carry the [Emancipation] proclamation in to effect.”

Lincoln’s official position on slavery changed, too—from early promises that “I have no purpose, directly or indirectly, to interfere with the institution of slavery in the States where it exists,” to the issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation, and eventually to support for a constitutional amendment abolishing slavery—and those changes allowed many soldiers to feel a kinship with the president because to them it appeared that his views had changed much as theirs had. “You know Father that I started in this war with no real abolition sentiment and I even believed in enforecing the Fugitive slave law,” reflected Alphonso Barto, “but I have seen more of the curse of the thing since that and when President Lincoln came out with his emancipation Proclamation I was fully prepared to endorse

23. Pvt. Thomas Covert, 6th Ohio Cavalry, to wife, January 11, 1863, Thomas Covert Papers, Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, Ohio.
26. Illinois Cavalryman to Quincy Whig and Republican, March 26, 1863; ibid., November 11, 1863.
27. Abraham Lincoln, First Inaugural Address, March 4, 1861, Collected Works, 4:263. Lincoln was reiterating a point he had made in several earlier speeches.
it and that heartily too. Can it be a wrong in any light to blot out an institution . . . blacker than the fiends of Hell?”

In the second half of the war, many Union soldiers’ views on slavery continued to evolve in an unexpected way as the horror and loss of war led a growing number of them to interpret slavery as a shared national—not simply southern—sin for which the whole nation must repent. “When I came into the service myself and many others did not believe in interfering with slavery but we have changed our opinions,” Amos Hostetter told his sister and brother-in-law. “Any country that allows the curse of Slavery and Amalgamation as this has done, should be cursed and I believe in my soul that God allowed this war for the very purpose of clearing out the evil and punishing us as a nation for allowing it,” he lectured to his disapproving relatives, who did not share his views. When it looked like the war was finally approaching an end, John Moore felt sure that God had delayed Union victory until Americans (not just southerners) came “to see that slavery is and has been a national evil and God will not bless a nation who are guilty of such gross evil.”

Moreover, soldiers believed that Lincoln evolved right alongside them, and it is not hard to understand why they would think so. Amos Hostetter, John Moore, and countless more like them could hardly fail to notice that Lincoln echoed their thoughts in the Second Inaugural Address when he portrayed “this terrible war” as God’s judgment on “both North and South . . . as the woe due to those by whom the offence” of “American Slavery” came.

In underscoring the slavery issue’s complexity, in highlighting emancipation’s centrality to ideological as well as tactical victory for the Union, and in demonstrating a capacity for changing his own ideas in response to the tragedy and loss of war, Abraham Lincoln convinced Union soldiers that he understood their wartime experiences, and he harbored the only vision of Union, emancipation, and war aims that they believed could save the nation. In those specific ways, he earned their regard, affection, and trust.

Yet outside the ranks of the Union army, a far more variegated picture emerged during the war. Lincoln had his civilian supporters, to be sure,

31. Second Inaugural Address, Collected Works, 8:333.
and white and black antislavery advocates welcomed action against slavery, but opposition to Lincoln in general and fierce dissent over emancipation in particular raged along the northern home front for the duration of the war. Northern abolitionists white and black decried what they viewed as the president’s slow pace of change, impatient with the hemming and hawing and legal niceties that they viewed as obscuring what was to them a very clear-cut need to destroy slavery. The nation’s most prominent black abolitionist, Frederick Douglass, discerned “no very hopeful impression” in Lincoln in the early stages of the war and went so far as to equate the president’s “moral level” with that of slaveholders.32 Most famously, New York Tribune editor Horace Greeley claimed to speak for “twenty millions” of northerners when he castigated Lincoln for “the seeming subserviency of your policy to the slaveholding, slavery-upholding interest.”33 As soon as the war began, the veteran abolitionist publication the Liberator demanded the “extinction of slavery” and evinced no shyness in scolding Lincoln’s tardiness on that score as the conflict progressed.34

The abolitionist press might have seen emancipation in clear-cut terms, but northerners generally did not, and the complexity of the emancipation issue led some northerners sympathetic to Lincoln’s antislavery politics in principle to criticize the president’s actions on legal grounds. Even a moderate newspaper like the Harrisburg (Pennsylvania) Patriot & Union worried that hasty action on the slavery question would doom the success of the Union cause and therefore any hope for even gradual emancipation because it would “gain for us the undying hatred of the South, and render the restoration of confidence impossible.”35 Legal scholar Francis Lieber frequently found fault with Lincoln not for proposing an end to slavery but rather for not doing so on what Lieber saw as the soundest legal principles. To Lieber, the existence of war meant that state or municipal laws governing slavery no longer applied but rather that international law assuming every human being to be free did, so Lincoln’s conciliation to slaveholders was not only wrong-headed but in violation of international law.36

34. The Liberator, May 3, 1861.
36. This theme is a recurrent refrain in Lieber’s papers, but for some examples see Francis Lieber to Attorney General Edward Bates correspondence throughout 1862,
In the border states and slaveholding states that remained in the Union, Lincoln’s stance on emancipation was an even more explosive topic. When Lincoln issued the Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, the *Louisville (Kentucky) Journal* practically sputtered with rage at “Abraham Lincoln, the temporary occupant of the Executive chair,” declaring him guilty of a “mad act” and the Proclamation “a thing of comparatively little worth.”

Even in the free states of the North, plenty of residents just plain opposed the idea of emancipation on straightforwardly racist grounds. George Smith, a Democratic member of the Wisconsin State Assembly, angrily denounced the Emancipation Proclamation as an “assumption of power, and . . . effort to humiliate the free people of this country” perpetrated by “Abraham Lincoln.” For Smith and those who shared his opinions, the Proclamation signified not high-mindedness nor even shrewd sagacity but rather “inefficiency and incapacity to be at the head of public affairs in this great national crisis,” and the man who issued it had “in every way forfeited the respect and confidence of the American people.”

“Widow maker” was one of the more repeatable things that newspaper editor Brick Pomeroy called Abraham Lincoln. In one characteristic outburst, Pomeroy blasted Lincoln for the mounting war toll, each and every one of which he saw as the direct result of the “imbecility of the widow making President!” Not for Pomeroy were comforting bromides about lives sacrificed for a glorious cause. Instead, he insisted, “these men have been by driblets fed into the mangling machine—smothered to death in cotton or stunk to death between niggers—not for the salvation of the country but for the glorification of honest Old Abe the clown and usurper, who, in his crusade for niggers, has marked his path with the blood and bones of his betters at every step.”

Francis Lieber Papers, mss. Li box 23, and Francis Lieber to Charles Sumner Correspondence 1861—1864, Francis Lieber Papers, mss. Li box 32—44, Henry E. Huntington Library, San Marino, California. Lieber’s position was well-enough known that one admirer wrote to him, “We are giving our most precious blood, and yet the President hesitates [sic] to use the negro! How I wish we had such men as you” in power rather than the “vacillating know-nothings” of the Lincoln administration.” J. P. Thompson to Francis Lieber, September 15, 1862, quoted in Frank Freidel, *Francis Lieber: Nineteenth-Century Liberal* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1947), 349.


To the disgust of soldiers, their own loved ones sometimes sounded more like Smith or Pomeroy. Recuperating in an army hospital, Private Jasper Barney was dismayed to learn that his sister and brother-in-law took a dim view of Lincoln for issuing the Emancipation Proclamation.40 And Ohio Private Chauncey Welton, once a fervent anti-emancipation Democrat, got into something of an epistolary shouting match with his father over the elder Welton’s views on Lincoln and on emancipation, views that made the young private so angry that he all but called his father a disloyal traitor while he, Chauncey, took delight in a “country free free free yes free from that blighting curs Slavery the cause of four years Bloody Warfare.”41

Unsurprisingly, African Americans’ wartime views of Lincoln often linked to emancipation as well. Scholars, students, and partisans of various points of view today might spar over whether the Emancipation Proclamation boldly wiped away slavery with the stroke of a pen or, conversely, did not free a single slave, but black men and women at the time saw clearly that it represented one important step in the long and difficult process of ending slavery, and they acted accordingly. Word of the Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, which pledged in September 1862 to eradicate slavery in areas still in rebellion by January 1, 1863, tore through Confederate territory, and as it did, thousands of slaves cut through argument and legal sophistry to grasp the tool that they understood the Proclamation to be in dismantling slavery. One Union army official at Fort Monroe in Virginia reported that slaves flocked by the hundreds from as far away as North Carolina. They “know all about the Proclamation,” he reported, “and they started [for Union lines] in the belief in it.”42 The same phenomenon occurred in the Mississippi Valley, where General Grenville M. Dodge, Commander of the Corinth District in Mississippi, founded a camp for “contrabands,” or fleeing slaves, in late 1862 because so many slaves were flocking to the Union army in anticipation of the Proclamation going into effect at the first of the

41. Cpl. Chauncey Welton, 103rd Ohio, to parents, February 18, 1865, Chauncey B. Welton Letters, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina—Chapel Hill.
42. Capt. C. B. Wilder, Superintendent of Contrabands, Fort Monroe, Va., Testimony before the American Freedmen’s Inquiry Commission, May 1863, Records of the American Freedmen’s Inquiry Commission, RG 94, Letters Received by the Office of the Adjutant General (Main Series) 1861–1870, 1863–328–0, microfilm 619, reel 200, frame 148, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C.
year. The wartime freedom papers issued by government officials to former slaves, such as escaped Arkansas slaves Nancy Mitchell and her little boy, John, explicitly claimed that the bearers of the papers were free “by virtue of the Proclamation of the President of the United States.”

Even black Americans who had every reason to know that the individual most responsible for many a slave’s freedom was the slave himself or herself recognized the Proclamation as significant, though not all-powerful. William B. Gould became free when he ran to Union army boats anchored off the eastern shore of North Carolina. He joined the Union navy, and as a sailor on U.S. navy steamers he regularly picked up runaway slaves and transported them to freedom behind Union lines well before January 1, 1863. Yet Gould still paused to record January 1, 1863, in his diary because in his view the Emancipation Proclamation made the day one of signal importance. And there was little doubt in many black Americans’ minds that the individual responsible for the Emancipation Proclamation was Abraham Lincoln. Black Union soldiers such as Sergeant James Taylor of the 93rd United States Colored Troops and Private David Brown of the 31st United States Colored Troops, for example, wholeheartedly endorsed the president because they associated him with emancipation in general and the Emancipation Proclamation in particular.

Of course perfect agreement about Lincoln’s role in emancipation, or his merits in general, did not reign among black Americans any more than it did among white Americans. To some, Lincoln hardly figured into how emancipation happened at all. John Washington, a Fredericksburg, Virginia, escapee from slavery, and Wallace Turnage, an Alabama field hand who claimed his own freedom by running away, credited themselves, the Union army, and God, but not Abraham Lincoln. An

44. Nancy Mitchell Emancipation Paper, August 8, 1863, St. Louis, Mo., and John Mitchell Emancipation Paper, August 8, 1863, George Davis Family Collection, folder 1, Western Historical Manuscripts Collection, University of Missouri, St. Louis.
enslaved black preacher named Uncle Silas told fellow slaves near Nashville in September 1862 that “Freedom will come to you,” and “God being your helper, you must work out your own salvation.”

Henry McNeal Turner, a free black minister and chaplain to black Union soldiers, took a particularly critical view of the president for not moving more swiftly. “The principles which should have governed him, were those of eternal justice; they were clearly laid down in the Bible. . . . And had these principles been his modus operandi, or his compass, to run the national ship by,” slaves would have been free, and the war would have been won much sooner, said Turner.

But more often, positive views of Lincoln reigned among black Americans for his perceived instrumentality in bringing about an end to slavery. Slaves from South Carolina to Missouri flat out compared Abraham Lincoln to Jesus Christ. Mississippi slave Charlie Moses showed no hesitation in naming Lincoln as “the man that set us free” before breaking into the chorus of “Free at Last,” a song that decades later, he still associated with the mere mention of Lincoln’s name.

On January 1, 1864, the first anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation, a runaway slave turned minister preached to freedpeople


49. Chaplain Henry Turner, 1st United States Colored Troops, to Editor, September 10, 1864, Christian Recorder September 17, 1864, p. 1. See also another soldier who withheld praise from Lincoln because the president decided only “tardily to do justice” to slaves when emancipation was “forced upon him by the irrepressible conflict of the times.” R. H. B., 3rd United States Colored Troops, to Editor, September 7, 1864, Christian Recorder, September 17, 1864, p. 1.

50. See, for example, the testimony of Captain E.W. Hooper, aide to General Saxton, post commander and military governor in the South Carolina Sea Islands, who discussed with the Union postmaster local blacks’ habit of likening Lincoln to Jesus [Captain E.W. Hooper Testimony to American Freedmen’s Inquiry Commission (AFIC), AFIC Papers, file 3, p. 230, Records of the American Freedmen’s Inquiry Commission, National Archives and Records Administration RG 94, Letters Received by the Office of the Adjutant General (Main Series) 1861–1870 1863–328–0, microfilm 619, reel 200, frame 411, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C.] and the account of Missouri former slave Sarah Waggoner, who claimed that “Abe Lincoln was jes’ next to Jesus Christ. Yes, Oh Lord! Yes! Dat he was! Jes’ next to Jesus Christ!” Aunt Sarah Waggoner, Savannah, Mo., Works Progress Administration Slave Narrative Project, Missouri Narratives, Vol. 10 p. 358, Federal Writer’s Project, United States Work Projects Administration (WPA); Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, http://memory.loc.gov/ammmem/snh/html.

in Beaufort, North Carolina, about “the blessings which their great and good President had conferred upon them.”

Many slaves and former slaves might have harbored unambiguously positive views of Lincoln, and they might have portrayed links between Lincoln and emancipation as plain and straightforward, yet often they too possessed a richer, more complex understanding than first meets the eye. As a shorthand for that understanding we might call it a “Lincoln and” approach, which is to say, that as important as many black Americans viewed Lincoln’s role in the drama of emancipation, as often as not, they viewed that role as part of the story but not the whole story. Some emphasized the intertwined roles of Lincoln and the Union army, a linkage evident in the phrase “Lincoln’s gunboats” repeatedly used by former slaves in the Sea Islands who associated the arrival of the Union army in November 1861 with the arrival of emancipation. The “Lincoln’s gunboats” phrase also appeared wherever Union steamers plied the Mississippi River, signifying slaves’ perceptions that slavery crumbled when these particular representations of the president showed up.

For John McCline, a young slave boy growing up near Nashville, Tennessee, it took Lincoln, the army, and his own efforts to secure freedom. In early 1862 Lincoln’s soldiers appeared at Clover Bottoms, the plantation where he lived. They hired and paid some of the women to cook and launder for them and told the entire gathering that “every one of us were free—that is, all who agreed to follow the army and be of such use to it as it saw fit to put us.” Some men and women took advantage of that offer and secured freedom right then and there, but John himself realized freedom later that year, in December 1862 when, just as the Emancipation Proclamation was about to go into effect, he followed the soldiers of the 13th Michigan Infantry off the plantation. He befriended a teenaged former slave from Kentucky named Aron, and the two discussed the links between “the government that protected me,” as John put it, and the

52. James Rumley Diary, January 1, 1864, Levi Woodbury Pigott Collection, North Carolina Department of Archives and History. As a disgusted white Confederate, Rumley was a hostile witness who found the preaching singularly distasteful.

young boys’ own efforts to “do . . . what we can to free ourselves” by aiding Lincoln’s soldiers.  

By far the most common interpretation among African Americans yoked Lincoln and Providence. In this version, Lincoln was God’s specially chosen instrument for bringing about emancipation in accordance with divine plan. As North Carolina slave Hannah Crasson saw it, God “got into Lincoln and the Yankees” and inspired Lincoln to say that “every borned man must be free.” Crasson thanked “de will of God for setting us free” but also reserved a key role for Lincoln as the “Medicine man” who carried out that will on earth. A Georgia slave, Elisha Doc Garey, also saw God working through Lincoln. “When Mr. Abraham Lincoln come to dis passage in de Bible: ‘My son, therefore shall ye be free indeed,’ he went to wuk to sot us free. He was a great man—Mr. Lincoln was,” Garey declared. The Lincoln-and-Providence interpretation even crossed international boundaries. William Howard had been born a free black man in Baltimore, Maryland, but he resettled in Hamilton, Ontario, in 1854. In 1863 Howard commented that many of his neighbors, most of them former slaves from the United States, “seem to think that Mr. Lincoln is the greatest of men from the skillful manner in which he has managed, and that all is right now. They think that it is all providential, and that Providence is working the thing out” through Lincoln.

The group that most simply and straightforwardly linked Lincoln with emancipation during the Civil War unquestionably was white southerners: Confederates harbored no doubt that the end of slavery was the doing of one Abraham Lincoln. Even before hostilities broke out, white southerners were sure that Lincoln meant the death knell of slavery. Jesse, a coachman on a Tennessee plantation, paid close attention to white gossip in the fall of 1860 and reported to his fellow slaves that “it seemed a settled question among all that if Lincoln was elected . . . there would be a civil war in the country,

54. Furman, *Slavery in the Clover Bottoms*, 44, 51, 65. McCline would later note joy at Lincoln’s re-election and sorrow at his assassination.
57. William Howard’s Testimony to the American Freedmen’s Inquiry Commission, 1863, file 10, p. 8–9, Canada West, Records of the American Freedmen’s Inquiry Commission, RG 94, Letters Received by the Office of the Adjutant General (Main Series) 1861–1870, 1863–328–0, microfilm 619, reel 201, frames 287–88.
that he was against slavery and would use every means in his power to crush it.”

Lincoln might have spent the early part of the war deprecating any intention to interfere with slavery, but white southerners did not believe a word of it, and when Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, they discerned evidence of what they had known all along. “By their resent [sic] acts the Lincoln government have shown plainly what they have in reality been fighting for all the time: the abolition of slavery,” Texas Private John Street told his wife in October 1862. The Missouri Confederates who created a camp newspaper called the *Vidette* agreed that the Proclamation simply revealed Lincoln’s real designs. “Now, any man who pretends to believe that this is not a war for the emancipation of the blacks . . . is either a fool or a liar,” bellowed the pages of the *Vidette*. Robert Cartmell, a Confederate civilian who lived near Jackson, Tennessee, repeatedly referred to the Emancipation Proclamation as “Lincoln’s Proclamation” complaining that because of it, “negroes . . . are entirely corrupted.” “To one born and raised in the South & accustomed to keeping the sons of Ham in their proper place,” Lincoln’s proclamation is “hard to endure,” he reflected bitterly. In Beaufort, North Carolina, Confederate civilian James Rumley glumly marked January 1, 1863, with the notation that “this will long be remembered as the day on which Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation goes into operation.” One year later he called January 1, 1864, “the first anniversary of the day on which Lincoln’s imperial edict set [the slaves] free.” At the close of the war in April 1865, Rumley still saw emancipation as chiefly the work of Lincoln: “The people cannot forget his Emancipation Proclamation,” Rumley vowed, “an outrage against humanity and civilized warfare, which will blacken the memory of the . . President forever.”

Summarizing views of Abraham Lincoln during the Civil War, then, requires some precision. As formal hostilities approached an end in the early spring of 1865, a solid South of Confederate opinion allowed no doubt that Lincoln brought about emancipation and deserved to

59. Pvt. John Street, 8th Texas, to wife, October 2, 1862, John K. and Melinda East Street Papers, Southern Historical Collection.
60. The *Vidette*, November 2, 1862, p. 3, Tennessee State Library and Archives. The *Vidette* was the camp newspaper of Morgan’s Confederate Cavalry.
61. Robert Cartmell Diary, November 2, 1862, Tennessee State Library and Archives. For another reference to “his Proclamation” see diary entry for February 1, 1863.
62. James Rumley Diary, January 1, 1863, January 1, 1864, April 21, 1865, Levi Woodbury Pigott Collection, North Carolina Department of Archives and History.
be excoriated for it. Opinions among white northern civilians ranged from those who reviled Lincoln for emancipation, to those who ignored emancipation but disliked Lincoln for other reasons, to those who downplayed emancipation but liked Lincoln for other reasons, to those whose support for Lincoln grew from their own antislavery convictions. The men of the Union army overwhelmingly championed Lincoln because they believed that he had come to share their vision of Union, emancipation, and the war. Black Americans’ views occupied a continuum that included some ambivalent or even critical views but clustered more heavily at the end of the spectrum that regarded Lincoln positively and assigned him a chief, though rarely solitary, role in bringing about emancipation. We have, in other words, a fairly complex picture.

And then came the assassination of Lincoln, which drained the complexity right out of the picture as precision gave way to polarization. Lincoln’s untimely death practically guaranteed that the power of Lincoln as a symbol would overshadow the mortal, human Lincoln, with simpler renditions of Lincoln that would be easier to appropriate for postwar agendas.

The immediate reaction to Lincoln’s death among northerners and African Americans everywhere was grief, pure and simple, and it overwhelmed the deep divisions in northerners’ wartime views of the president. “The soldier feels as though he had lost his best friend and the country her best Statesman,” mourned one Ohio soldier when he heard the awful news in North Carolina.63 A black Union soldier serving in Florida reported that “sorrow and misery fell upon us and was depicted upon the countenance of every loyal heart.”64 Even farther away, the U.S. frigate Niagara was chasing Confederate blockade runners off the coast of the Portugal when sailors on board heard “the awful tidings of the assassination of President Lincoln at the Theater in Washington,” as black sailor W. B. Gould noted in his diary.65 In the following days, Gould wrote a letter to a prominent black newspaper back home, telling readers about how his ship “displayed our colors at half-mast and fired a national salute . . . to a just and good man, of whom the American people will ever be proud.”66

63. Sgt. Nathan Parmater, 29th Ohio, April 17, 1865, Nathan Parmater Papers, Ohio Historical Society.
65. Gould, Diary of a Contraband, 76.
66. Ibid., 242–43.
Even the usually divided northern home front seemed to respond with one voice, although in some cases that voice downplayed emancipation in favor of emphasis on national reunification. A typical sermon in Milwaukee recognized the “the horror, the grief, the unspeakable anguish that pervaded all hearts” when Lincoln died, but it spent more time extolling the late president’s virtues and accomplishments, including his role in ending slavery. “The long sacrifice completed and accepted. Indivisible nationality and universal liberty bought and paid for—paid for with a heavy price, but—paid for. In the past, the toil and sacrifice, the doubt and fear, the blood and anguish, and in the past, the sin. In the future, peace, and union, and prosperity, and glory unspeakable! To thee, Father Abraham, next to the Sovereign Ruler of nations, do we owe all this. Under thy wise and virtuous guidance we have prevailed. In thee we behold the embodiment of all that is best in us—wisdom, moderation, generosity, forgiveness, patience, trust, firmness—all the virtues of the christian, the patriot, and the statesman.”

Even Brick Pomeroy printed black mourning bands between the columns of the very newspaper that had spent the war scurrilously attacking the president, although those columns studiously avoided mention of emancipation. “A nation mourns,” Pomeroy editorialized, and “We mourn with the people, for a great man has fallen. President Lincoln . . . was a man of genius—a lover of his country—an honest man—a statesman. . . . Lincoln was the President of a great Republic. He was acting as he believed to be right, and his wisdom was rapidly being substantiated and proven. His death is a loss to the nation.”

Certainly, the homogenization of views resulted partly from the shared trauma of losing the president: after all, a U.S. president had never been assassinated. But more than just shock was at work. The symbolic timing of Lincoln’s death on Good Friday seemed to most onlookers as more than mere coincidence. Instead, it seemed the work of God, and the apparent opinions of God carried a great deal of weight with many nineteenth-century Americans.

Further, as time passed, Abraham Lincoln’s successor, Andrew Johnson, began to make Lincoln look very much preferable to the alternative, prompting many of the wartime complaints, concerns, and reservations about Lincoln to fade in comparison. Still aboard ship in European waters, William B. Gould began to grow uneasy.


about Johnson’s intentions as the text of Johnson’s speeches reached the decks. He “must and shall be resisted,” Gould vowed. 69 Sarah Jane Foster, a white northern aid worker who was teaching in a black school in West Virginia after the war, had not always been sure that Abraham Lincoln was up to the task during the war. But on the first anniversary of Lincoln’s assassination she reflected, “One year ago today our dearly beloved President was killed. Now we have I fear a traitor at the helm. Heaven save us all.”70 William Driver was an old man by the time the Civil War came. A career U.S. navy man originally from Massachusetts, he and his family were living in Nashville, Tennessee, in 1861, and he felt too old to try to leave, so he sat tight until the Union army occupied Nashville and then served in various civil capacities. As far as he was concerned Andrew Johnson’s ascent to power was nothing short of tragedy. Writing in his diary in the 1870s Driver remembered April 1865 as a golden moment when anything was possible, until, as he mournfully put it, “the Death of Mr. Lincoln seemed to palsy us,” while “the southern Demigog and stump speaker” Andrew Johnson “nailed to the Cross of national imbecility the last hope of a Race whose unnumbered wrongs are before the Throne of God.”71

Confederate diehard James Rumley’s reaction to Andrew Johnson’s first two months in office corroborates views of those like Foster and Driver. “In the mysterious Providence of God, Lincoln was removed from the theater of his power forever, and the executive power of the Government passed into the hands of Andrew Johnson . . . who knows too much of mental incapacity of the negro, and too much of southern sentiments” to continue along paths laid out by Lincoln. Johnson as president “removes the darkest, blackest cloud that hung over us,” Rumley rejoiced, and “inspired new hopes within us.”72 With friends like that, Andrew Johnson couldn’t help but look like an enemy to many northern and black onlookers, which made Lincoln seem positively flawless in comparison.

A celebratory view of Lincoln in general, and Lincoln as Emancipator in particular, lasted well into the postwar period among northern whites and black Americans everywhere. It is not terribly surprising to note that likenesses of Lincoln reliably appeared at Union soldiers’

69. Gould, Diary of a Contraband, 251.
71. William Driver Diary, n.d. [1870s], William Driver Papers, Tennessee State Library and Archives.
72. James Rumley Diary, June 5, 1865.
veterans gatherings, but even more notable, likenesses of the sixteenth president proved just as ubiquitous among populations that had been more ambivalent than Union soldiers during the war. Civilian opinions of Lincoln in St. Louis, Missouri, could have been described as mixed at best during the war, but in 1868, the Ladies Union Aid Society of that city joined in national efforts to erect a statue to Lincoln the Emancipator in Washington, D.C., an effort widely reputed to have been begun by a woman who had once been a slave. Meanwhile, Missouri’s first institution of higher education for blacks began life as the brainchild of Charlton Tandy, a black man born free in Kentucky who spent the war in a black regiment and the postwar in a variety of government positions Tandy named the school the Lincoln Institute. Postwar emancipation celebrations, such as those held in black neighborhoods of Washington, D.C., in 1866 and 1867, routinely featured parades with handsome, lovingly made Lincoln banners on display. Meanwhile, ex-Confederate antipathy toward the man who had altered the alleged natural order of things did not abate.

Today, things stand quite differently in many respects. Perhaps the most dramatic difference is between Confederate and neo-Confederate opinion. It takes nothing more than a Google search to verify that, according to modern-day sympathizers with the Confederacy, Abraham Lincoln had nothing whatsoever to do with ending slavery. African American views of Lincoln are much less united. Among a particular strain of scholars beginning in the 1970s, it became commonplace to cast Lincoln not in the leading role in the drama of emancipation, but rather as a villain who did everything he could to block black freedom. When amiable journalist and Civil War enthusiast Tony Horwitz visited a classroom of black schoolchildren in Alabama in the 1990s, he was astonished to hear preteen African Americans denounce Lincoln as a racist. Yet portraits of Lincoln adorn some black churches and small, local African American history museums around the country. White northerners are probably most likely to simplify and exaggerate Lincoln’s role in emancipation, but even there, opinions are far from uniform. Few self-respectingly cynical junior-high students, no matter where they are from, will fail to tell

73. Union Aid Society (Saint Louis, Missouri), Minute Book, December 8, 1868, p. 91, Missouri Historical Society.
74. Charlton H. Tandy Papers, Western Historical Manuscript Collection, University of Missouri, St. Louis.
75. See examples in John Washington Diary in Blight, A Slave No More, 97 and 98.
you that Lincoln cared nothing about slavery but only wanted to save the Union. These dramatic changes have occurred partly due to the passage of time, especially as our distance from Andrew Johnson’s presidency has grown, and therefore Johnson’s vividness as a foil or counterpoint has faded. Yet time alone does not provide a satisfying explanation for the shifts.

In trying to understand why views of Lincoln have evolved when and how they have, we have often made the mistake of asking who questions rather than why questions. In other words, it is tempting to interrogate and impugn the motives of anyone who understands Lincoln differently than oneself, but doing so can blind us to the important truth that the variations are not just products of individual whim. Rather, they are themselves important historical phenomenon inherent to the very nature of emancipation and of wartime leadership in a democracy.

To put the point another way, the shifts and changes are almost inevitable as long as our thinking about Lincoln remains bound up with our thinking about his role in the wartime destruction of slavery in a democratic society, because emancipation itself stubbornly resists easy memorialization. It was not a single event or moment that can be straightforwardly commemorated on a convenient anniversary date. Instead, it was an enormously complicated process that sometimes went forwards, backwards, and sideways all at the same time. It was a process that involved not a single individual or even a handful of individuals, but rather a cast of thousands, because, as Lincoln recognized, slavery was far too powerful and deeply rooted to be destroyed by anything else. Consequently, the linkages between emancipation and our sixteenth president will probably always remain volatile and views of Lincoln constantly subject to change, much as the very surface of the earth will continually shift and resettle as sedimentary rocks crumble and reaccumulate, igneous rocks melt and crystallize, and metamorphic rocks crack and reform. Insofar as the changes encourage us to continually reassess our thinking about Lincoln, the Civil War, and the end of slavery, and insofar as they remind us that changing views were themselves key aspects of Lincoln’s presidency and wartime leadership, those changes offer real benefits. Perhaps they can even encourage us to think anew and act anew when times require, as Lincoln himself proved able to do.