Review Essay

The Uncertainties of Lincoln’s Emancipation
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Concluding his famous memoirs, General Ulysses S. Grant wrote, “The cause of the great War of the Rebellion against the United States will have to be attributed to slavery.” Grant reminded his audience that the reunion and reconciliation narratives that had become popular in the 1880s obscured the fundamental dispute about the legitimacy and future of the institution of slavery that lay at the heart of the American Civil War. Modern historians agree with Grant about the root cause of the war—slavery. But how was the country to deal with slavery when it was not clear to even the best minds of the day that human bondage lay at the root of the Civil War?

In 2013—the sesquicentennial year of the issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation—scholars have taken up the challenge of analyzing and explaining how policymakers, and especially President Abraham Lincoln, thought through the problem of slavery and how best to bring about its demise. What this impressive body of historical scholarship emphasizes is not the event of the Proclamation on January 1, 1863, but rather the process of decision-making and education of the president, the Congress, the Union army (officers and men), and the country in the need to—even duty to—end slavery as a legal and constitutional institution. Lincoln’s Hundred Days: The Emancipation Proclamation and the War for the Union is a scholarly, accessible study of the process and pressures of emancipation that will—and ought to—find a wide audience.

On September 28, 1862, President Abraham Lincoln responded to a letter from his vice president, Hannibal Hamlin of Maine, in which Hamlin praised Lincoln for issuing the preliminary Emancipation


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Proclamation six days earlier. Writing to Maine (and it may say something about how important the office of the vice president was in the nineteenth century to know that Hamlin spent most of his time as vice president in Maine), Lincoln wrote back, thanking Hamlin for his support on this most controversial of presidential decisions—uncompensated, presidential, military emancipation. Lincoln opened his letter saying, “It is known to some that while I hope something from the proclamation, my expectations are not as sanguine as are those of some friends. The time for its effect southward has not come; but northward the effect should be instantaneous.”

But Lincoln’s mood about the preliminary proclamation and its immediate reception by the country was not optimistic. He continued, saying the proclamation was “six days old, and while commendation in the newspapers and by distinguished individuals is all that a vain man could wish, the stocks have declined, and troops come forward more slowly than ever. This, looked soberly in the face, is not very satisfactory.” In the letter, Lincoln suggests that his decision for emancipation may have been a political blunder: “We have fewer troops in the field at the end of six days than we had at the beginning—the attrition among the old outnumbering the addition by the new. The North responds to the proclamation sufficiently in breath; but breath alone kills no rebels.”

With his famous cold, clear-eyed assessment of his own historical moment and that particular historical moment and historical context, Lincoln understood that the proclamation must advance the war and aid in the killing of rebels, both to preserve the Union and to end slavery. At no time did emancipation constitute the primary war goal for


3. Lincoln to Hamlin, Abraham Lincoln, 375.
Lincoln, but, emancipation could be made to be a means to the Union’s ultimate goal—preserving the Union (increasingly being described by northerners and midwesterners as preserving the “nation”).

For Lincoln, slavery both hung over and lay just beneath the surface of events during the early weeks and months of his administration. Constitutional restraints, legal rules, military policies, political necessities, and international pressures all enveloped Lincoln, his administration, and the North and Midwest during the early improvised years of the war. In politics and in life, timing can be everything, and Lincoln well understood the issue and problem of timing. In his second inaugural, Lincoln acknowledged that whatever he did or had done depended on the course of the war; as he put the issue, “The progress of our arms, upon which all else chiefly depends, is well known to the public as to myself. . . .” Add to Lincoln’s innate sense of timing his own dislike of the institution of slavery, and the historical challenge becomes one of explaining how, why, and when Lincoln decided on uncompensated military emancipation based on the commander in chief powers. That is the challenge that Masur accepted in writing *Lincoln’s Hundred Days*.

Masur is the author of eight books on United States history on such widely varying topics as an edition of the autobiography of Benjamin Franklin, an analysis of the shifting cultural meanings of capital punishment, baseball history, and the year 1831. Masur has also employed his wide depth of reading and notable analytical skills on the late twentieth-century and early twenty-first-century rock singer Bruce Springsteen. But in *Lincoln’s Hundred Days*, Masur seeks to “track the unfolding drama of history as Lincoln led a nation at war toward emancipation and, in doing so, traversed the anxieties and expectations of voters, soldiers, scholars, politicians, reformers, foreign leaders, and even the enslaved.”

Professor of American Studies and History at Rutgers University, Masur covers far more time and space than the hundred days from Lincoln’s issuance of the Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation of September 22, 1862, to his issuance of the final Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863.

Masur’s thesis is contingency: to assist modern readers, scholars, and students in understanding that the war did not necessarily mean emancipation, and that as the issue of emancipation grew and pressed on Lincoln and his administration, that the president possessed valid legal, constitutional, and political doubts about the policy. Over the course of 1862, Lincoln educated himself about those complex issues

and troubling concerns as he applied his forensic thinking to the multi-layered problem of emancipation. He consulted a broad range of people and acquaintances, colleagues, rivals, and cabinet members; he weighed the consequences, and he made haste slowly (but never backward) on this most difficult of issues. Thus, what Masur has presented is an effort to explain to modern readers just how difficult emancipation appeared and felt to that generation of policymakers, and especially to Abraham Lincoln. Unlike today, when too many people incorrectly understand emancipation as a logical outgrowth of the political and legal dynamic of the Civil War, Masur recaptures the contingent and incremental, even conservative nature of Lincoln’s decision for emancipation and the country’s varied reactions to Lincoln’s leadership and decisions on the issue. Thus, it was Lincoln’s sense of political timing (too slow for the extremists in the abolitionist ranks and too fast for many of the ordinary men in the ranks) combined with his rhetorical explanations (from the text of the Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation to the December 1862 Annual Message to Congress to the text of the final Emancipation Proclamation) that proved the tipping point in the national shift to emancipation as a supplementary war goal to preserve what the Founders had established. It is this gradual building of consensus on this controversial topic together with a deft understanding of Lincoln’s own intellectual journey on emancipation that endows Masur’s book with its weight and importance.

Regardless, a few issues with the work exist. Masur over-plays the radicalization of the Union army officer corps and enlisted personnel. Yes, no doubt some officers and men who adamantly opposed adding emancipation to the war’s purposes switched or shifted their opinion and came around to at least a minimum level of support for emancipation. But the anecdotal primary evidence Masur relies upon does not rise to the level of persuasion. On this topic of the switch in the army from an attitude of ambivalence or hostility on the issue of emancipation to becoming an army of emancipation is simply not proven here nor supported in the larger literature. As a domestic historian of the United States, it is not surprising that Masur downplays foreign affairs in the movement toward an emancipation policy. While no doubt correct that in the realpolitik world of international relations, the military events on the ground influenced European decision-makers more than any emancipation policy, emancipation mattered among key interest groups in Europe more than Masur argues. And, as an American Studies professor, Masur includes art in his analysis. Chapter 13, “Emancipation Triumphant,” takes the reader through the background, production, showing, and shelving of Francis Bicknell
Carpenter’s painting, *First Reading of the Emancipation Proclamation of President Lincoln*. While interesting, Masur’s analysis of this piece of art (and others throughout the book) read like sideshows to the primary story and argument—the difficulty within that historical context to reach emancipation. While not a huge problem, historians will find themselves skimming the “artsy” sections.

Regardless, *Lincoln’s Hundred Days* advances the literature on this most important of topics by making accessible to a wide audience of scholars, advanced students, undergraduates, and Civil War readers an important part of the Civil War public policy story. Without diminishing the military history of the war or slighting the genuine bravery and sacrifices of that generation of men and women who served, it is the public policies from the era that have survived and continue to inform the country and to be relevant in the modern world. A short list of those policies must, of course, include Lincoln’s leadership example of presidential, uncompensated, military emancipation, but also the Thirteenth Amendment (and its enforcement clause, the first in the 1787 Constitution), the Civil Rights Act of 1866, the second American Constitution and the basis of the modern constitutional structure—the Fourteenth Amendment—and the Enforcement Acts of 1870 and 1871 (now known as 42 U.S.C. §1983) together with the Fifteenth Amendment. Those hundred-plus days changed the war, the Lincoln administration, and the course of the United States. Hmmm, it sounds like an ideal topic for a nuanced piece of cinema brought to a wide general audience through an outstanding cast and based on this impressive book by Louis P. Masur.