

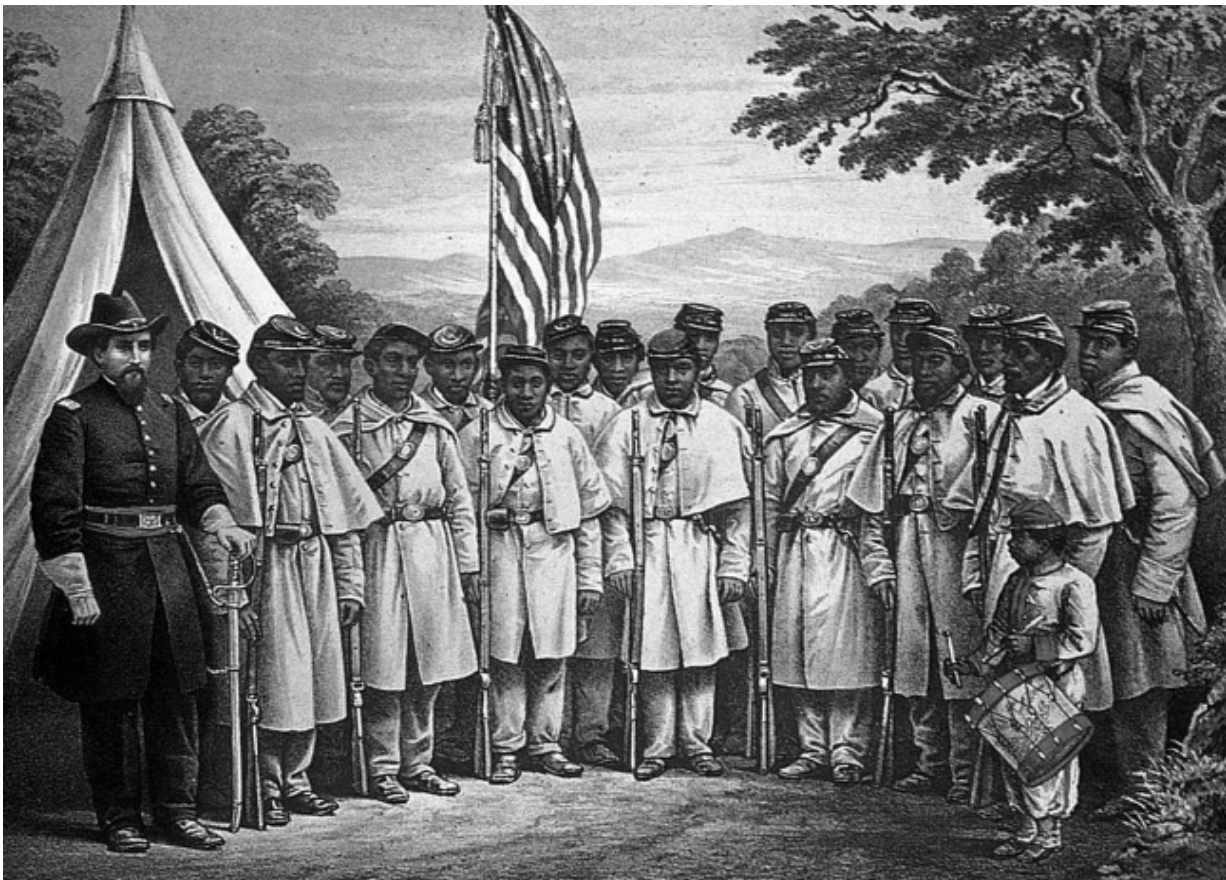
## LESSON 8

# A War to Free the Slaves?

BY BILL BIGELOW

FEW DOCUMENTS IN U.S. HISTORY share the hallowed reputation of the Emancipation Proclamation. Many, perhaps most, of my students have heard of it. They know — at least vaguely — that it pronounced freedom for enslaved African Americans, and earned President Abraham Lincoln the title of Great Emancipator. They know what it says, but no one has read it. Every U.S. history textbook mentions it, but I’ve never seen a single textbook that actually includes its full text.

Here, students examine excerpts from Lincoln’s first inaugural address, the rarely mentioned original 13th Amendment to the Constitution that Lincoln promised to support, and the Emancipation Proclamation. This lesson asks students to think about what these documents reveal about Lincoln’s war aims. Was it a “war to free the slaves”? Lincoln never said it was. Most textbooks don’t even say it was. And yet the myth persists: It was the “war to free the slaves.”



Bettmann/ORBIS

*A group of African American Union soldiers and their white officer in a portrait sketched in 1862.*

This lesson's intent is important but narrow. Although Lincoln did not begin his presidency with the intent to abolish slavery, that doesn't mean that the Confederacy did not secede with the intent to maintain slavery. And, of course, the seceding states *did* believe that it was Lincoln's intention to end slavery. As South Carolina delegates wrote in their "Declaration of the Immediate Causes Which Induce and Justify the Secession of South Carolina from the Federal Union," "A geographical line has been drawn across the Union, and all the States north of that line have united in the election of a man to the high office of President of the United States, whose opinions and purposes are hostile to slavery."

This lesson introduces students to documents that puncture the myth that Lincoln waged the war to "free the slaves." It concludes by asking them to reflect on why Lincoln and the Republicans would wage war, if it was not to end slavery.

One caveat: As Eric Foner demonstrates well in his book *The Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln and American Slavery*, Lincoln's views shifted as the

war progressed. Were you to want to expand this lesson, you might read with students Lincoln's full second inaugural address (much shorter than the first), delivered while the war was still on. By March of 1865, Lincoln was not promising slaveholders that they could keep their slaves, as he did in 1861; nor is he the careful author of the 1863 Emancipation Proclamation, which indicates county by county where slavery is not to be abolished. By 1865, Lincoln strikes a weary but unambiguously antislavery stance: "Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondsman's 250 years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said 3,000 years ago, so still it must be said 'the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.'" Attitudes of many whites, including Abraham Lincoln, about slavery shifted dramatically during the war. This transformation is not the subject of this lesson, but is important.

---

## Materials Needed

- Copies of Handout 8–A (which includes excerpts from Lincoln's first inaugural address; on the reverse side, the original 13th Amendment and reading questions) for every student.
- Copies of the "Emancipation Proclamation" (Handout 8–B) for every student.

## Time Required

One class period.

## Suggested Procedure:

1. Ask students: If you were to go up to most people on the street and ask them, "Why did Lincoln and the North fight the Civil War?" what do you think they'd say? Some students will respond that people would just say, "I don't know." But, in my experience, most students

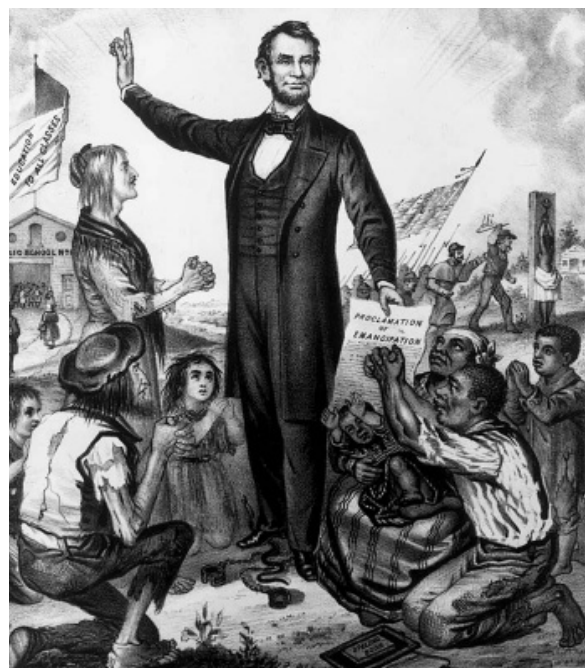
will say that people would tell them that the North was in the Civil War to "free the slaves." Write this on the board: LINCOLN AND THE NORTH FOUGHT THE CIVIL WAR TO FREE THE SLAVES. Tell students that by analyzing some key documents, you want to test out this statement, and with them, propose some other possible explanations for the war. We're speaking here of real, underlying reasons for the war, not why particular individuals fought. As we know, many individuals did fight to free the slaves; indeed, that was the only reason some people fought. Like many teachers, I use the film *Glory* to explore the role of Black soldiers, some of them formerly enslaved, in making it a "war to free the slaves." But this activity, focusing on Lincoln's 1861 inaugural address and the Emancipation Proclamation, highlights official U.S. government aims, not the aims of the abolition movement or of particular individuals.

[The above instruction probably deserves an asterisk. My 30 years of teaching high school history was spent in Oregon. This lesson is based on addressing the myths that I found my students had absorbed about the causes of the Civil War — at least about the war aims of Lincoln and the North. If one were to ask this question in a more open-ended manner — for example, “Why was the Civil War fought?” — “states’ rights” would be a frequent student answer, as it would be were we to ask “Why did Southern states secede and fight in the Civil War?” It would be a different lesson, but depending on where you teach, and the particular myths you feel are the most important to examine, rewording this question so that it asks about the war’s aims from the standpoint of the Confederate states might be a provocative opening to a lesson examining secession documents. As the South Carolina quote above indicates, “states’ rights” is as historically inaccurate a myth as “to free the slaves.” The virulent Southern support for the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act, which was a frontal attack on “states’ rights,” is another piece of evidence that punctures this myth.]

2. Next, ask students: If you were to ask “Who freed the slaves?” what would most people answer?” Again, there might be a few outliers, but the general answer students will give is Lincoln. Now ask students, “Given that most people believe that Abraham Lincoln was the Great Emancipator, what would you expect to find in his first speech as president?” In my experience, students have many ideas about what Lincoln might say, but almost always the comments center around slavery being an immoral, unjust evil that must be stopped. List students’ ideas on the board.
3. Ask students to read “From Lincoln’s First Inaugural Address” (Handout 8-A). Depending on the skill level of the group, and how easily frustrated they become, ask them to pair up and answer the questions following the reading.

4. Some further questions for discussion:

- Why does Lincoln say that the Southern states shouldn’t worry about the Republicans endangering slavery?
- What reasons does Lincoln offer for why he will not interfere with slavery?
- What laws might Lincoln be referring to when he says that he will enforce the laws and offer protection “as cheerfully to one section as to another. . .”?
- What does Lincoln promise the leaders of slaveholding states in the second excerpt?
- If Lincoln was against slavery, why would he promise to make the protection of slavery “irrevocable” — permanent? In what sense was Lincoln against slavery?
- How might U.S. history have turned out differently had the Southern states accepted Lincoln’s offer to support the original 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, guaranteeing slavery forever, and returned to the Union?



“Abe’s Proclamation,” an 1865 engraving by J. L. Magee, casts Lincoln as the liberator of both Black and white Americans through the Emancipation Proclamation and his leadership in the Civil War.

5. Return to the list students generated about what they thought Lincoln would say in his inaugural speech. Ideas on this often stand in sharp contrast to Lincoln's actual remarks. Ask students to consider: Why is there such a difference between the popular image of Lincoln, and the Lincoln of 1861?
6. Ask students to turn to the "Emancipation Proclamation" (Handout 8-B). With students, define the document's title word by word. Collect their knowledge: What have they heard about the Emancipation Proclamation? Have they ever read it? Who told them about it? Again, ask students to pair up or to form small groups to read and analyze the document together. Ask them to look for "Who did the Emancipation Proclamation emancipate? Who did it not emancipate?" Some additional discussion questions:
  - The Emancipation Proclamation was issued more than three months (Sept. 22, 1862) from the date it was to take effect (Jan. 1, 1863). What was the significance of the proclamation not taking effect immediately?
  - Based on how the document is worded, could someone who owned slaves in, say, Alabama keep his slaves, if sometime in December 1862 Alabama had rejoined the Union?
  - Why doesn't the Emancipation Proclamation simply declare immediate freedom for all people enslaved anywhere in the United States?
  - Why does Lincoln say he is issuing this proclamation? [Notice that in only two places does he offer any explanation. He writes that it is an action required because 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. . ." Later in the document he says that he issues the proclamation "upon military necessity." He offers no critique of slavery here.]
- What advice does Lincoln offer to the people who may eventually be freed by the proclamation?
- Lincoln says that the Emancipation Proclamation is a war measure, but he doesn't urge people freed from slavery to stop working on Southern plantations or to attack the Confederacy and their former masters. Why not?
- In the document, President Lincoln lists numerous counties and Louisiana parishes. Why? What's so special about these places?
- One written criticism of the Emancipation Proclamation, from the Democrat-controlled Illinois Legislature, warned that "The proclamation invites servile insurrection. . ." — slave revolts. Do you agree?
- Even though Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation holds out the promise that slavery may be maintained in many regions of the United States, how might African Americans, both free and enslaved, have worked to make the Civil War into an antislavery crusade?
7. Finally, ask students to suggest some alternative theories for why Lincoln and the Republicans in power (and many Democrats) were willing to wage war to keep the Union together. List these on the board. Ask students how one might test these theories. If students don't suggest it themselves, I offer one theory: that powerful interests in the North were desperate to maintain the Union because they benefited materially from the raw materials, especially cotton, grown by cheap (enslaved) workers in the South; and benefited from the Southern markets for Northern manufactured goods. You might ask students to make columns of different theories and in the columns to list evidence that supports or refutes the theories.

# From Lincoln’s First Inaugural Address

March 4, 1861

## Excerpt #1

Apprehension seems to exist among the people of the Southern States that by the accession of a Republican administration their property and their peace and personal security are to be endangered. There has never been any reasonable cause for such apprehension. Indeed, the most ample evidence to the contrary has all the while existed and been open to their inspection. It is found in nearly all the published speeches of him who now addresses you. I do but quote from one of those speeches when I declare that “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.” . . .

I now reiterate these sentiments; and, in doing so, I only press upon the public attention the most conclusive evidence of which the case is susceptible, that the property, peace, and security of no section are to be in any wise endangered by the now incoming administration. I add, too, that all the protection which, consistently with the Constitution and the laws, can be given, will be cheerfully given to all the States when lawfully demanded, for whatever cause — as cheerfully to one section as to another.

## Excerpt #2

I understand a proposed amendment to the constitution — which amendment, however, I have not seen — has passed Congress, to the effect that the Federal Government shall never interfere with the domestic institutions of the States, including that of persons held to service. To avoid misconstruction of what I have said, I depart from my purpose not to speak of particular amendments so far as to say that, holding such a provision to now be implied constitutional law, I have no objection to its being made express and irrevocable.

---

From Commager, Henry Steele, ed. *Documents of American History*, Sixth Edition (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1958): 385, 388.

# Original Proposed 13th Amendment to the Constitution

No AMENDMENT shall be made to the Constitution which will authorize or give to Congress the power to abolish or interfere, within any State, with the domestic institutions thereof, including that of persons held to labor or service by the laws of said State.

---

## Questions:

1. In your own words, summarize what Lincoln is saying in these two excerpts from his first inaugural address. What is he promising?
2. Which part or parts of the country do you think Lincoln is mainly speaking to in these excerpts?
3. Put the original 13th Amendment in your own words.
4. By the time Abraham Lincoln gave this inaugural address in March 1861, seven states had already seceded from the Union. Why do you think these Southern states did not accept his offer and return to the Union?

# Emancipation Proclamation

Jan. 1, 1863

## A PROCLAMATION

Whereas on the 22nd day of September, A.D. 1862, a proclamation was issued by the President of the United States, containing, among other things, the following, to wit:

“That on the 1st day of January, A.D. 1863, 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.

“That the executive will on the 1st day of January aforesaid, by proclamation, designate the States and parts of States, if any, in which the people thereof, respectively, shall then be in rebellion against the United States; and the fact that any State or the people thereof shall on that day be in good faith represented in the Congress of the United States by members chosen thereto at elections wherein a majority of the qualified voters of such States shall have participated, shall, in the absence of strong countervailing testimony, be deemed conclusive evidence that such State and the people thereof are not then in rebellion against the United States.”

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 1st day of January, A.D. 1863, and in accordance with my purpose so to do, publicly proclaimed for the full period of one hundred days from the first day 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 Berkeley, Accomac, Northampton, Elizabeth City, York, Princess Anne, 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-defense; and I recommend

to them that, in all case when allowed, they labor faithfully for reasonable wages.

And I further declare and make known that such persons of suitable condition will be received into the armed service of the United States to garrison forts, positions, stations, and other places, and to man vessels of all sorts in said service.

And 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.

In witness whereof, I have hereunto set my hand and caused the seal of the United States to be affixed.

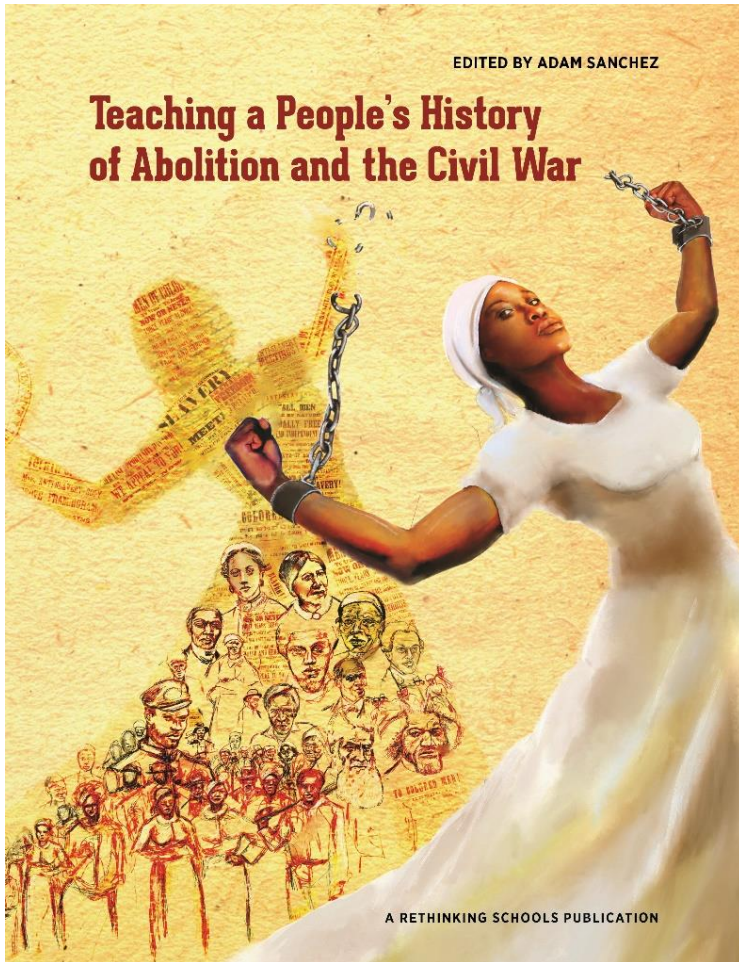
Done at the City of Washington, this first day of January, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty-three, and of the Independence of the United States of America the eighty-seventh.

By the President: ABRAHAM LINCOLN

WILLIAM H. SEWARD, Secretary of State.



# rethinking schools



The “A War to Free the Slaves?” lesson can also be found in Rethinking Schools teaching guide, *Teaching a People’s History of Abolition and the Civil War* edited by Adam Sanchez. The book offers a collection of 10 classroom-tested lessons on one of the most transformative periods in U.S. history.

These lessons encourage students to take a critical look at the popular narrative that centers Abraham Lincoln as the Great Emancipator and ignores the resistance of abolitionists and enslaved people.

To preview the book’s introduction, table of contents, and order direct from the publisher, please visit:

[www.rethinkingschools.org/books/title/teaching-a-people-s-history-of-abolition-and-the-civil-war](http://www.rethinkingschools.org/books/title/teaching-a-people-s-history-of-abolition-and-the-civil-war)

“A valuable blueprint for teaching the history of abolitionism and the end of slavery. . . . Coming at a moment of activism by modern descendants of the struggle for freedom, the book could not be more timely.”

*Eric Foner, DeWitt Clinton Professor Emeritus of History, Columbia University and author of The Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln and American Slavery*

“By debunking the false history of lone great men and restoring the role of diverse coalitions of ordinary people working together to make extraordinary change, these lessons provide a factual basis for hope and inspiration amid oppressive circumstances.”

*Chenjerai Kumanyika, Assistant professor of Journalism and Media Studies, Rutgers University, and co-executive producer and co-host of Uncivil*

# RethinkingSchools.org