

# 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* Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution that Lincoln promised to sign, 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.



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

## Suggested Procedure:

1. Ask students: If you were to go up to most people on the street and ask them, “Why was the Civil War fought?” 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 war was fought to free the slaves. Write this on the board: THE CIVIL WAR WAS FOUGHT TO FREE THE SLAVES. Tell students that by analyzing some key documents, you want to test out this theory, and with them, propose some other theories. 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 former slaves, 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* aims, not the aims of the abolition movement or of particular individuals.
2. Ask students to read “From Lincoln’s First Inaugural Address,” p. 4. 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.
3. 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

---

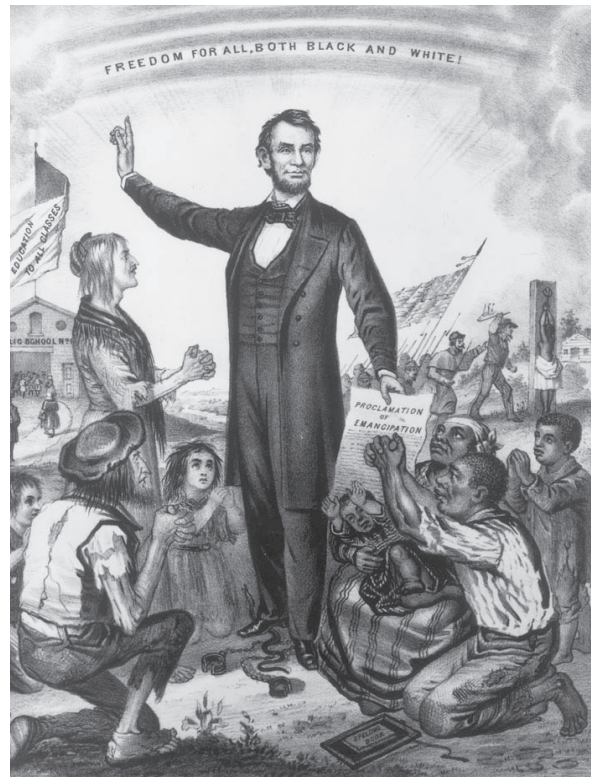
*Was the Civil War  
a war to free the  
slaves? Lincoln  
never said it was.  
Most textbooks  
don’t even say  
it was. And yet the  
myth persists.*

---

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 Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, guaranteeing slavery forever, and returned to the Union?
  - Why didn’t the southern states accept Lincoln’s offer and return to the Union?
4. Ask students to turn to the *Emancipation Proclamation* on p. 6. 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. They should answer the questions that follow. Some additional discussion questions:
    - The *Emancipation Proclamation* was issued over three months (September 22, 1862) from the date it was to take effect (January 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 held as slaves 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 freed slaves 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 State 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 anti-slavery crusade?
5. 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 might these theories be tested. If students don’t suggest it themselves, I offer one theory, that powerful interests in the North were anxious to



Hulton Archive/Getty Images

*“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.*

maintain the Union because they benefited materially from the **raw materials**, especially cotton, grown by **cheap (enslaved) workers**; and, finally, 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.

This article is offered free to the public as part of the **Zinn Education Project**, a collaboration of Rethinking Schools and Teaching for Change, publishers and distributors of social justice educational materials. For more information:

**Rethinking Schools**  
www.rethinkingschools.org  
800-669-4192

**Teaching for Change**  
www.teachingforchange.org  
800-763-9131



# 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 misconception 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 Henry Steele Commager, ed., *Documents of American History* (Sixth Edition) (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1958); p. 385 and p. 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

January 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, Terrebone, 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.