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Great Emancipator was Radical of his Day: Lincoln Opposed Economic Injustice

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Abstract
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Yet there has always been doubt about just how great an emancipator he really was. Why did he wait for two years into his presidency to issue his Emancipation Proclamation? And why didn't that Proclamation free all the 3.9 million African-Americans then held in bondage? [*excerpt*]

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Great Emancipator was Radical of his Day

Lincoln opposed economic injustice

By Allen C. Guelzo | 5 p.m. Feb. 11, 2016

"If slavery is not wrong, nothing is wrong," Abraham Lincoln said in 1864. "I can not remember when I did not so think, and feel."

Yet there has always been doubt about just how great an emancipator he really was. Why did he wait for two years into his presidency to issue his Emancipation Proclamation? And why didn't that Proclamation free all the 3.9 million African-Americans then held in bondage?

The answers rest in Lincoln himself. But we know he thought of slavery primarily as an economic injustice rather than a racial one. It forced people into labor they had not chosen, and took from them what that labor produced.

Lincoln could remember his own resentment at the easy way his father had rented him out to neighboring farmers and pocketed all his earnings. Lincoln would say later that the turning point of his life came when he was able to keep two silver half-dollars he had earned on the Ohio River for ferrying two strangers out to a passing steamboat. "It was a most important incident in my life. I could scarcely credit that I, a poor boy, had earned a dollar in less than a day. ... The world seemed wider and fairer before me."

Slavery, in Lincoln's mind, was any economic relationship based on force and confiscation, and in his experience, it was an offense that rose above questions of race. "I used to be a slave," he said in 1858, "and now I am so free that they let me practice law." He admitted that he had "no purpose to introduce political and social equality between the white and the black races." But "in the right to eat the bread, without leave of anybody else, which his own hand earns," every African-American "is my equal and the equal of ... every living man."

The great question before the Civil War, however, was what to do about slavery, since it was protected by law in 15 states.

The wisest path to ending slavery, argued Lincoln, was to hem it into the states where it was then legal and admit no further slave states to the Union. But slaveholders had no intention of allowing themselves to be hemmed-in. When Lincoln was elected president in 1860, 11 of the slave-holding states organized themselves as the Confederate States of America, and civil war broke out between North and South. But even as president of the United States, Lincoln lacked any clear constitutional authority to undo state laws about slavery.

That left Lincoln only one other option, and it was the most risky of all — a proclamation of emancipation, freeing the slaves, issued not in his civilian authority as president but as a military necessity decreed in his capacity as commander-in-chief, relying on his presidential “war powers.” No president had ever actually attempted to use these “war powers.” But time and the opportunity to act against slavery was slipping away, and Lincoln “had about come to the conclusion that ... we must free the slaves or be ourselves subdued.” On July 22, 1862, he submitted a draft emancipation proclamation to his cabinet, then issued it in preliminary form on Sept. 22, and finally signed it into law on Jan. 1, 1863.

The Proclamation did not free slaves in the four slave states that had refused to join the rebels. A “war powers” proclamation could only operate on those who were at war with the government. Not until the 1864 congressional elections gave Lincoln an irrefutable mandate was he able to press onward to a constitutional amendment that ended slavery everywhere in the nation.

Several years ago, speaking at a college in upstate New York, I laid out the legal niceties of Lincoln’s strategy for emancipation. But one questioner in the audience complained that it just ”didn't feel right” to say “Lincoln freed the slaves.” He was afraid that Lincoln was being given credit he didn't deserve, while the role of everyone else — including the slaves — was neglected.

It’s true that many hands pulled down the edifice of slavery. But Lincoln’s hands remain the most important. Without Lincoln’s attention to the legalities of emancipation, fugitive slaves would never be anything more than fugitives, and a civil war might have ended with federal courts still protecting slaveholding.

Frederick Douglass, the African-American abolitionist, said that, “viewed from the genuine abolition ground, Mr. Lincoln seemed tardy, cold, dull, and indifferent; but measuring him by the sentiment of his country, a sentiment he was bound as a statesman to consult, he was swift, zealous, radical, and determined.” Our understanding of history, and of Abraham Lincoln, needs to be reminded of that.

Guelzo *is the Henry R. Luce professor of the Civil War Era at Gettysburg College, and the author of the new book “Redeeming the Great Emancipator.” He wrote this for What It Means to Be American, a national conversation hosted by the Smithsonian and Zócalo Public Square.*

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