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Summary Article: **Emancipation Proclamation**

From *The Columbia Encyclopedia*

in U.S. history, the executive order abolishing slavery in the Confederate States of America.

Desire for Such a Proclamation

In the early part of the Civil War, President Lincoln refrained from issuing an edict freeing the slaves despite the insistent urgings of abolitionists. Believing that the war was being fought solely to preserve the Union, he sought to avoid alienating the slaveholding border states that had remained in the Union. "If I could save the Union without freeing *any* slave, I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing *all* the slaves, I would do it; and if I could do it by freeing some and leaving others alone, I would also do that." He wrote these words to Horace Greeley on Aug. 22, 1862, in answer to criticism from that administration

gadfly; he had, however, long since decided, after much reflection, to adopt the third course.

Lincoln kept the plan to himself until July 13, 1862, when, according to the cabinet diarist Gideon Welles, he first mentioned it to Welles and Secretary of State William H. Seward. On July 22 he read a preliminary draft to the cabinet and acquiesced in Seward's suggestion to wait until after a Union victory before issuing the proclamation. The Antietam campaign presented that opportunity, and on Sept. 22, 1862, after reading a second draft to the cabinet, he issued a preliminary proclamation that announced that emancipation would become effective on Jan. 1, 1863, in those states "in rebellion" that had not meanwhile laid down their arms.

The Proclamation

On Jan. 1, 1863, the formal and definite Emancipation Proclamation was issued. The President, by virtue of his powers as commander in chief, declared free all those slaves residing in territory in rebellion against the federal government "as a fit and necessary war measure for suppressing said rebellion." Congress, in effect, had done as much in its confiscation acts of Aug., 1861, and July, 1862, but its legislation did not have the popular appeal of the Emancipation Proclamation—despite the great limitations of the proclamation, which did not affect slaves in those states that had remained loyal to the Union or in territory of the Confederacy that had been reconquered. These were freed in other ways (see slavery). Nor did the proclamation have any immediate effect in the vast area over which the Confederacy retained control. Confederate leaders, however, feared that it would serve as an incitement to insurrection and denounced it.

Purpose of the Proclamation

The proclamation did not reflect Lincoln's desired solution for the slavery problem. He continued to favor gradual emancipation, to be undertaken voluntarily by the states, with federal compensation to slaveholders, a plan he considered eminently just in view of the common responsibility of North and South for the existence of slavery. The Emancipation Proclamation was chiefly a declaration of policy, which, it was hoped, would serve as an opening wedge in depleting the South's great manpower reserve in slaves and, equally important, would enhance the Union cause in the eyes of Europeans, especially the British.

At home it was duly hailed by the radical abolitionists, but it cost Lincoln the support of many conservatives and undoubtedly figured in the Republican setback in the congressional elections of 1862. This was more than offset by the boost it gave the Union abroad, where, on the whole, it was warmly received; in combination with subsequent Union victories, it ended all hopes of the Confederacy for recognition from Britain and France. Doubts as to its constitutionality were later removed by the adoption of the Thirteenth Amendment.

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