

representations of cultural exchange. Blackface, whether one approved of it or not, provided a theatrical forum within which blacks could, to a degree and never free of the scientific construction of race, talk back and participate in the social representation of an African American self.

Chapter Five



Who Freed the Slaves?
Emancipation and Its Meaning

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ON January 1, 1863, Abraham Lincoln promulgated his Emancipation Proclamation.¹ A document whose grand title promised so much but whose bland words seemed to deliver so little, the Emancipation Proclamation was an enigma from the first. Contemporaries were unsure whether to condemn it as a failure of idealism or applaud it as a triumph of *realpolitik*, and the American people have remained similarly divided ever since. Few officially sponsored commemorations currently mark the day slaves once called "The Great Jubilee," and, of late, black Americans have taken to celebrating their liberation on Juneteenth, a previously little-known marker of the arrival of the Union army in Texas and the announcement of emancipation in the most distant corner of the Confederacy. Unlike other American icons—the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, for example—the Emancipation Proclamation is not on regular display at the National Archives.

For this reason, the public exhibition of the Emancipation Proclamation in January 1993 on the occasion of the 130th anniversary of its issuance was a moment of some note. The exhibit sent thousands of Americans into the streets, where they waited in long lines on frigid January days to see Lincoln's handiwork. At the end of the five-day exhibit, some thirty thousand people had filed passed the Proclamation. As visitors left

the Archives' great rotunda, reporters waited with microphones in hand. Before national television audiences, visitors declared themselves deeply moved by the great document. One told a reporter from the *Washington Post* that it had changed his life forever.²

Such interest in a document whose faded words cannot be easily seen, let alone deciphered, and whose intricate logic cannot be easily unraveled, let alone comprehended, raises important questions about the role of history in the way Americans think about their racial past and present. It appears that the very inaccessibility of the Emancipation Proclamation makes Lincoln's pronouncement a focal point for conflicting notions about America's racial destiny. For many Americans, both black and white, the Proclamation signifies the distance the American people have traveled from the nightmarish reality of slavery—what one visitor called a “humiliation too painful to speak of.” For others, it suggested the distance that had yet to be traversed: “we have to build on the changes that started with our ancestors 130 years ago.”³

However they viewed the Proclamation, visitors used Lincoln's edict as the occasion to call for rapprochement between black and white in a racially divided nation. Dismissing the notion that Lincoln embodied—rather than transcended—American racism (the greatest “honky” of them all, Julius Lester once declared⁴), the men and women who paraded before the Proclamation saw the document as a balm. It was as if Lincoln, or his words, could reach out across the ages and heal the wound. Mrs. Loretta Carter Hanes, a suburban Washington schoolteacher whose insistent requests for a public presentation of the Proclamation had initiated the exhibit, told reporters of her hope that the display would inaugurate another new birth of freedom.⁵

The exhibit of the Proclamation also brought historians out in force. Meeting in Washington in December 1992, the American Historical Association convened a panel entitled “Black, White, and Lincoln.” Professor James M. McPherson of Princeton University delivered the lead paper entitled “Who Freed the Slaves?”⁶

For historians, the issues involved in McPherson's question—and, by implication, Lincoln's proclamation—took on even greater significance because they reflected a larger debate between those who look to the top of the social order for cues in understanding the past and those who look to the bottom. It was an old controversy that had previously appeared in

the guise of a contest between social history and political history. Although the categories themselves had lost some of their relevance in the poststructuralist age, the politically charged argument over the very essence of the historical process retained much of its bite.⁷

The question of who freed the slaves thus not only addressed the specific issue of responsibility for emancipation in the American South; it also encompassed contemporary controversies over “Great Men” in the history books and “Great Literature” in the curricular canon. McPherson's paper and the discussion that followed reverberated with sharp condemnations and stout defenses of “white males.” Lines between scholars who purportedly gave “workers, immigrants, [and] women” their due and those who refused to acknowledge the “so-called ‘non-elite’” were drawn taut. While some celebrated history-from-the-bottom-up and condemned elitism, others called for a recognition of the realities of power and belittled a romanticization of the masses.

The public presentation of the Emancipation Proclamation at the National Archives and the debate among historians at the American Historical Association's meeting marked a rare but salutary confluence of the interests of citizens and scholars alike. Both events addressed conflicting notions about the role of high authority, on the one hand, and the actions of ordinary men and women, on the other, in shaping American society. Both the citizens who queued up outside the National Archives and the scholars who debated the issue within the confines of the historical association's meeting rooms found deep resonance in the exhibition of the Emancipation Proclamation. It gave reason to consider the struggle for a politics (and a history) that is appreciative of ordinary people and respectful of rightful authority in a democratic society. For that reason, it is worth probing the current debate about the largest emancipation of modern times.

The debate over the origins of Civil War emancipation in the American South can be parsed in such a way as to divide historians into two camps: those who understand emancipation primarily as the product of the slaves' struggle to free themselves, and those who see the Great Emancipator's hand at work. James McPherson made precisely such a division. While acknowledging the role of the slaves in their own liberation, he came down heavily on the side of Lincoln's authorship of emancipation, a fact he maintained most ordinary Americans grasped intuitively but one

that eluded some scholars whose taste for the complex, the nuanced, and the ironic had blinded them to the obvious. McPherson characterized the critics of Lincoln's preeminence—advocates of what he called the “self-emancipation thesis”—as scholarly populists whose stock in trade was a celebration of the “so-called ‘non-elite.’” Such scholars, McPherson implied, denied the historical role of “white males,” and perhaps all regularly constituted authority, in a misguided celebration of the masses.

McPherson singled out Vincent Harding as the high priest of the self-emancipationists, declaring Harding's *There Is A River: The Black Struggle for Freedom in America* “almost a Bible” for the revisionists.⁸ But there were other culprits, among them Robert F. Engs and myself and my colleagues on the Freedmen and Southern Society Project at the University of Maryland, whose multivolume documentary history, *Freedom*, he termed “the largest scholarly enterprise on the history of emancipation.”⁹ He gave special attention to Barbara Jeanne Fields, a member of the project who had articulated many of *Freedom's* themes on Ken Burns's TV documentary “The Civil War.”¹⁰ Together, these historians were responsible for elevating the “self-emancipation thesis” into what McPherson called “a new orthodoxy.”

McPherson discussed corollaries to the new orthodoxy that had important political implications. In portraying Lincoln as more a hindrance than a help to the cause of freedom, the revisionists, McPherson believed, purveyed the pernicious view that white historians had distorted the history of emancipation “to deprive blacks of credit for achieving their own freedom.” McPherson cited Robert Engs's contention that the glorification of Lincoln as the Great Emancipator was an attempt to convince black people that “white America” had given them “their freedom [rather] than allow them to realize the *empowerment* that taking it implied.”¹¹ If history was politics carried on by other means, the history of emancipation had deep meaning in contemporary racial politics.

McPherson's concerns were echoed in the protests of other scholars. Mark E. Neely, Jr., editor of the *Lincoln Encyclopedia* and a Pulitzer prize-winning study of Lincoln and civil rights, was angered by those who would “rob Lincoln of the credit for taking a leadership role in emancipation.” Like McPherson, Neely believed the proponents of self-emancipation distorted historical understanding by characterizing emancipation as the product of “white men sitting behind desks in Washington, D.C., writing

legalistic documents [that] did not really free any particular person.” But unlike McPherson, who saw Vincent Harding as the source of the problem, Neely targeted Leon F. Litwack and his *Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery*. By Neely's count, Litwack mentioned the Emancipation Proclamation “only ten times” in his 625-page book and then “usually in unflattering passages.” But Neely also found Litwack to be a willing co-conspirator with the editors of the Freedmen and Southern Society Project. In the most bizarre of charges, Neely claimed to have uncovered the project's agenda in the sequence in which its volumes had been published, finding ideological significance in the fact that series 2 of *Freedom*, *The Black Military Experience*, was published before the first volume in series 1, *The Destruction of Slavery*. To Neely, the purpose of this bit of historiographic chicanery was the promotion of the new orthodoxy. “The focus, again, was taken off Lincoln's proclamation itself.” “After the military volume, in reverse chronological order, the editors dealt with emancipation.”¹²

Lincoln's proclamation of January 1, 1863, as its critics have noted, freed not a single slave who was not already entitled to freedom under legislation passed by Congress the previous year. It applied only to the slaves in territories then beyond the reach of Federal authority. It specifically exempted Tennessee and Union-occupied portions of Louisiana and Virginia, and it left slavery in the loyal border states—Delaware, Maryland, Kentucky, and Missouri—untouched. Indeed, in a strict sense, the Proclamation went no further than the Second Confiscation Act of July 1862, which freed all slaves who entered Union lines professing that their owners were disloyal, as well as those slaves who fell under Federal control as Union troops occupied Confederate territory. Moreover, at its fullest, the Emancipation Proclamation rested upon the President's wartime power as commander in chief and was subject to constitutional challenge. Lincoln recognized the limitations of his ill-defined wartime authority, and, as his commitment to emancipation grew firmer in 1863 and 1864, he pressed for passage of a constitutional amendment to affirm slavery's destruction.

What then was the point of the Proclamation? It spoke in muffled tones that heralded not the dawn of universal liberty but the compromised and piecemeal arrival of an undefined freedom. Indeed, the Proclamation's flat prose, ridiculed by the late Richard Hofstadter as having “all the moral grandeur of a bill of lading,” suggests that the true authorship

of African American freedom lies elsewhere—not at the top of American society but at its base.¹³ McPherson, Neely, and others are correct in noting that the editors of the *Freedmen and Southern Society Project* and other revisionists built upon this insight.

From the first guns at Fort Sumter, the strongest advocates of emancipation were the slaves themselves. Lacking political standing or a public voice, forbidden access to the weapons of war, slaves nevertheless tossed aside the grand pronouncements of Lincoln and other Union leaders that the sectional conflict was only a war for national unity. Instead, they moved directly to put their own freedom—and that of their posterity—atop the national agenda. Steadily, as opportunities arose, slaves risked their all for freedom. By abandoning their owners, coming uninvited into Union lines, and offering their lives and labor in the Federal cause, slaves forced Federal soldiers at the lowest level to recognize their importance to the Union's success. That understanding traveled quickly up the chain of command. In time, it became evident to even the most obtuse Federal commanders that every slave who crossed into Union lines was a double gain: one subtracted from the Confederacy and one added to the Union. The slaves' resolute determination to secure their liberty converted many white Northern Americans—soldiers and civilians alike—to the view that the security of the Union depended upon the destruction of slavery. Eventually, this belief tipped the balance in favor of freedom, even among Yankees who displayed little interest in the question of slavery and no affection for black people.

Slaves were not without allies. Abolitionists, black and white, dismissed the Republican doctrine that slavery should be respected and given constitutional protection where it existed. Instead, abolitionists, like the slaves, saw the war as an opportunity to assault a system they believed was immoral and pressed for its extradition. Rather than condemn slavery from the comfort of their drawing rooms, some radical opponents of slavery volunteered to fight slavery on its own terrain, strapped on their haversacks, and marched south as part of the Union army. But soldiering was young men's work, and sex, age, condition, and circumstance barred many radicals from the Federal army. Most abolitionists could only fume against slavery in petitions, editorials, and sermons. Although their campaign on behalf of emancipation laid the foundation for congressional and then presidential action against slavery, the majority of abolitionists had but

slender means to attack slavery directly. Only slaves had both the commitment and the opportunity to initiate the assault on slavery.

Some slaves did not even wait for the war to begin. In March 1861, before the first shots at Fort Sumter, eight runaways presented themselves at Fort Pickens, a federal installation in Florida, "entertaining the idea"—in the words of the fort's commander—that Federal forces "were placed here to protect them and grant them their freedom." The commander believed otherwise and delivered the slaves to the local sheriff, who returned them to their owner.¹⁴ Although their mission failed, these eight runaways were only the first to evince publicly a conviction that eventually became widespread throughout the slave community.

In making the connection between the war and freedom, slaves also understood that a Union victory was imperative. They did what they could to secure it, throwing their full weight behind the Federal cause, volunteering their services as teamsters, stable hands, and boatmen; butchers, bakers, and cooks; nurses, orderlies, and laundresses; blacksmiths, coopers, and carpenters; and, by the tens of thousands, as common laborers. Slaves "tabooed" those few in their ranks who shunned the effort.¹⁵ Hundreds of thousands of black men and women would work for the Union army, and more than 135,000 slave men became Union soldiers. Even deep within the Confederacy, where escape to Federal lines was impossible, slaves did what they could to undermine the Confederacy and strengthen the Union—from aiding escaped Northern prisoners of war to praying for Northern military success. With their loyalty, their labor, and their lives, slaves provided crucial muscle and blood in support of the Federal war effort. No one was more responsible for smashing the shackles of slavery than the slaves.

Still, slaves could not free themselves. Nowhere in the four volumes of *Freedom* do the editors of the *Freedmen and Southern Society Project* claim they did. Nowhere in the four volumes of *Freedom* is the term *self-emancipation* employed. As far as I can discern, Harding, Litwack, and Engs do not use the term *self-emancipation*. Slaves could—and they did—put the issue of freedom on the wartime agenda; they could—and they did—make certain that the question of their liberation did not disappear in the complex welter of the war; they could—and they did—ensure that there was no retreat from the commitment to emancipation once the issue was drawn. In short, they did what was in their power to do with the

weapons they had. They could not vote, pass laws, issue field orders, or promulgate great proclamations. That was the realm of citizens, legislators, military officers, and the president. However, the actions of the slaves made it possible and necessary for citizens, legislators, military officers, and the president to act. Slaves were the prime movers in the emancipation drama, not the sole movers. Slaves set others in motion, including many who would never have moved if left to their own devices. How they did so is nothing less than the story of emancipation.¹⁶

Among the slaves' first students were Union soldiers of the lowest rank. Arriving in the South with little direct knowledge of slavery and often contemptuous of black people, Federal soldiers encountered slaves who were eager to test their owners' fulminations against Yankee abolitionists and black Republicans. Union soldiers soon found their camps inundated with slaves, often breathless, tattered, and bearing marks of abuse who were seeking sanctuary and offering to assist them in any way possible. In so doing, slaves took a considerable risk. They not only faced sure punishment if captured, but Union soldiers often turned upon them violently.

Still, some gained entry into Federal lines, where they found work aplenty. Sometimes the slaves' labor cut to the heart of the soldiers' military mission, as slaves understood that the enemy of their enemy was their friend and were pleased to impart information about Confederate troop movements, assist in the construction of Federal fortifications, and guide Union troops through a strange countryside. But just as often, slaves ingratiated themselves with Federal troops in ways that had no particular military significance. They foraged for firewood, cooked food, cleaned camps, and did dozens of onerous jobs that otherwise would have fallen to the soldiers themselves.

Northern soldiers did not have to be Free-Soilers, abolitionists, or even radical egalitarians to appreciate these valuable services. Thus, soldiers were dismayed to discover that they had violated orders by harboring the fugitives. They were more upset when the men and women who cleaned their camps and cooked their food were dragged off to certain punishment by angry masters or mistresses. Indeed, even those soldiers who stoutly maintained that they fought only for Union bitterly resented being implicated in the punishment of men and women who had done nothing more than do them a good turn in exchange for a blanket and a few morsels of food. "I don't care a damn for the darkies," declared one midwestern volunteer in March 1862, "but I couldn't help to send a run-

away nigger back. I'm blamed if I could."¹⁷ The "blame" many Union soldiers felt at being implicated in slavery was compounded by their outrage when they discovered that the very same men and women they had returned to bondage were being mobilized by the Confederate enemy against them. To Union soldiers, the folly of denying themselves the resources that their enemy used freely—indeed, assisting their enemy in maintaining those resources—seemed senseless to the point of absurdity.

These same lessons were also learned by Federal officers. The protection and employment offered to fugitive slaves by individual Northern soldiers created numerous conflicts between slaveholders and the Union army, embroiling officers in disagreeable contests whose resolution required considerable time and effort. Slaveholders, many of them brandishing Unionist credentials, demanded that Northern troops return fugitives who had taken refuge within their encampments. If regimental officers could not or would not comply, they blustered about connections that reached the highest level in Washington. Generally, the bluster was just that. But often enough, the officers soon felt the weight of high authority upon them. Officers of the middle ranks not only bore the brunt of the soldier's frustrations with Federal policy but also the sting of official rebuke. Made apologists for policies that they too believed contradicted experience and good sense, many field officers found themselves in the uncomfortable position of having to enforce that which they disdained. They objected particularly to being compelled to do the slave master's dirty work, and they intensely disliked being demeaned before their men. The high-handed demands of slave owners turned many Federal officers into the slaves' champion. When Federal policy toward fugitive slaves finally changed in the summer of 1862, one could hear an almost-audible sigh of relief from the Union officer corps. "This thing of guarding rebels property has about 'played out.' . . . We have guarded their homes and property long enough. . . . The only way to put down this rebellion is to hurt the instigators and abettors of it. Slavery must be cleaned out."¹⁸

Faced with conflicting demands—the need for labor versus the requirements of Federal policy, the desire to protect hapless fugitives versus the demands of Unionist owners—many Union soldiers and officers searched for ways to stand clear of the entire business, to be, in the idiom of the day, neither slave catcher nor slave stealer. Union policy toward slaves beginning in the fall of 1861 through the spring of 1862 was designed to eliminate the "devilish nigger question," as one Maryland official called it,

by excluding fugitive slaves from Union lines. But slaves refused to surrender their belief that the Federal army was a refuge from slavery; they would not allow Federal soldiers to evade the central reality of the war.

Slaves continued to press themselves on soldiers, bringing gifts of food, information, and of course labor. There always seemed to be a few Yankee soldiers who, for whatever reason, sheltered runaways, and a handful who encouraged slave flight. But even when the fugitives were denied entry to Federal lines, they camped outside, just far enough away to avoid expulsion by Union commanders, just close enough to avoid capture by Confederate soldiers. Meanwhile, alert for ways to turn the military conflict to their own advantage, slaves continued to search the seams of Federal policy looking for an opening: the ascent of a sympathetic commander or a crisis that might inflate the value of their knowledge or their muscle. Many learned the letter of the law so that they could seemingly recite from memory passages from the House Resolution of 1861, the additional Article of War of March 1862, the First Confiscation Act of August 1861, or the Second Confiscation Act of July 1862. Time and time again, slaves forced Federal soldiers and officers to make the choice, a choice that became easier as the Union army's need for labor grew. Change did not come at once, but it came.

The lessons slaves taught soldiers and soldiers taught officers slowly ascended the Union chain of command and in November 1861 reached Lincoln's cabinet for the first time. Secretary of War Simon Cameron publicly endorsed a proposal to arm slaves to fight for the Union and freedom.¹⁹ Lincoln quieted Cameron and packed him off to Russia as minister, but the slaves continued undeterred to press their case.

The slow shift in Federal policy gained momentum as the Union army penetrated deeper into the Confederacy, where slaveholders were not reluctant Unionists but outright rebels. In these circumstances, some field commanders became quick learners. Their respect for the old order yielded to a willingness to challenge the rights of the master and finally to a firm determination to extirpate slavery. Others learned slowly, imperfectly, or not at all. However, before long, the most obdurate generals began to disappear from places of high command, and the quick studies rose to the top.

The broad outline of the story was always the same. Slaves forced the issue: what should be done with them? Deciding the matter was always difficult, for it required a choice between the contradictory interests of the

master and of the slave. At first slaveholders held the upper hand, but in time the advantage slipped to the slaves. When the slaves' loyalty became more valuable than the masters' in the eyes of Federal authorities, the Federal army became the slaves' willing partner rather than its reluctant enemy. The process by which the Union army became an army of liberation was in its essence political and reveals how black people had been incorporated into American politics long before they had the vote, the right to petition, or independent standing at law.

But if the story was always the same, it was also always different. Individuals made a difference. A few generals—John C. Frémont, David Hunter, John W. Phelps—openly advertised their Free-Soil and abolitionist convictions; some generals, especially in the border states, were themselves slaveholders or sympathizers, and others were tied to the Democratic party; many, like William Tecumseh Sherman, would have preferred to avoid the “negro problem,” although Sherman had his own understanding of the relationship of slavery to the war.

But the beliefs of individual field commanders and their willingness to act on them only partially accounted for differences in the evolution of Federal policy; the story also differed from place to place and changed over time. Acceptance of the slaves' truth generally came quickest in the Confederate heartland. Marching through Alabama in May 1862, Gen. Ormsby M. Mitchel considered that the “negroes are our only friends,” an insight he quickly shared with Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton, whose own evolution to an advocate of emancipation was proceeding apace in the spring and summer of 1862.²⁰ Doubtless the greatest change came with the enlistment of black soldiers and later news of their battlefield valor at Fort Wagner, Port Hudson, and Milliken's Bend.

The slaves' lesson, moreover, did not travel merely within the military chain of command. As news of the war filtered northward, it moved outside of military lines entirely. In their letters home, citizen-soldiers not only informed the Northern public; they formed Northern opinion. At a time when rumor competed with gossip and hopes with wishes, perhaps nothing carried as much weight as the opinion of a husband, father, or son battling the enemy. Thus, the lesson slaves had taught soldiers reverberated in general-store gossip, newspaper editorials, and sermons throughout the North. It seemed particularly compelling to wives who wanted their husbands home and to parents who were fearful for their sons. It appealed to Northerners who were tired of the war and fearful of the

Federal government's seemingly insatiable appetite for young men. Many white Northerners enlisted in the slaves' cause even though they feared and despised black people. In August 1862, Governor Samuel J. Kirkwood of Iowa, no friend of abolition, put the matter bluntly in commenting on the possible employment of slave laborers. "When this war is over & we have summed up the entire loss of life it has imposed on the country I shall not have regrets if it is found that a part of the dead are *niggers* and *all* are not white men."²¹

The lesson that slaves taught common soldiers, that common soldiers taught officers, that officers taught field commanders, that field commanders taught their desk-bound superiors in Washington, and that resonated in the North was not wasted on Abraham Lincoln. In many ways, Lincoln was a slow learner, but he learned.

Lincoln was no friend of slavery. He believed, as he said many times, that "if slavery is not wrong, nothing is wrong." But, as president, Lincoln also believed he had a constitutional obligation not to interfere with slavery where it existed. Shortly before his inauguration, he offered to support a proposed constitutional amendment that would have prohibited any subsequent amendment authorizing Congress "to abolish or interfere . . . with the domestic institutions" of any state, including slavery.²² As wartime leader, he feared the disaffection of the loyal slave states, which he understood to be critical to the success of the Union. He crafted much of his wartime policy respecting slavery to avoid alienating loyal slaveholders, especially in Kentucky, Missouri, and Maryland. "I think to lose Kentucky is nearly the same as to lose the whole game," Lincoln wrote to Orville H. Browning, the senator from Illinois, in the fall of 1861. "Kentucky gone, we can not hold Missouri, nor, as I think, Maryland. These all against us, and the job on our hands is too large for us." Lincoln needed the border states, and even courted slaveholders in tiny Delaware, where fewer than two thousand black people remained in slavery.²³

But Lincoln's solicitude for the concerns of slaveholders, particularly Whiggish ones, went beyond the strategic importance of the border states and the fear that if they opted for secession, or refused to furnish soldiers to the Federal cause, the Union would be indefensible. Throughout the war, Lincoln held tight to the notion that Whiggish slaveholders retained a residual loyalty to the Union and could be weaned away from the Confederacy. Much of his policy in wartime Louisiana was crafted precisely

toward this end, and this premise would shape his plans for postwar Reconstruction.²⁴

Lincoln also doubted whether white and black could live as equals in American society and thought it best for black people to remove themselves physically from the United States.²⁵ Like many white Americans from Thomas Jefferson to Henry Clay, Lincoln favored the colonization of former slaves in Africa or elsewhere. At his insistence, the congressional legislation providing for the emancipation of slaves in the District of Columbia in April 1862 included a \$100,000 appropriation to aid the removal of liberated slaves who wished to leave the United States. The Second Confiscation Act added another half million dollars to the funds for the same purpose. Through the end of 1862, Lincoln continually connected emancipation in the border states to the idea of colonizing slaves somewhere beyond the boundaries of the United States. Lincoln clung to the policy of expatriating black people long after most had abandoned it as a reasonable strategy to gain acceptance for emancipation or as a practical policy to address the consequences of emancipation.²⁶

Where others led on emancipation, Lincoln followed. Lincoln responded slowly to demands for emancipation as they rose through the military chain of command and as they echoed on the Northern home front. Even as pressure for emancipation grew in the spring of 1862, Lincoln continued to urge gradual, compensated emancipation. The compensation would be to slaveholders for property lost, not to slaves for labor stolen. In late September 1862, even while announcing that he would proclaim emancipation on January 1 if the rebellious states did not return to the Union, he again called for gradual, compensated emancipation in the border states and compensation for loyal slaveholders elsewhere. The preliminary emancipation proclamation also reiterated his support for colonizing freed slaves "upon this continent or elsewhere."²⁷ While some pressed for the enlistment of black soldiers, Lincoln doubted the capacity of black men for military service, fearing that former slaves would simply turn their guns over to their old masters.

As black laborers became essential to the Union war effort and as demands to enlist black men in the Federal army mounted, the pressure for emancipation became inexorable. By the summer of 1862, Lincoln understood the importance of the sable arm as well as any. On July 12, making yet another plea for gradual, compensated emancipation in the Union's

own slave states, Lincoln bluntly warned border-state congressmen that slavery was doomed “by mere friction and abrasion—by the mere incidents of the war,” and that it would be impossible to restore the Union with slavery in place.²⁸ Ignored once again, Lincoln acted on his own advice. In late July 1862, five days after signing the Second Confiscation and the Militia acts, he issued an executive order translating the new legislation into instructions for the Union army and navy. He authorized military commanders operating in the seceded states to “seize and use any property, real or personal, which may be necessary or convenient for . . . military purposes,” and he instructed them to “employ as laborers . . . so many persons of African descent as can be advantageously used for military and naval purposes.” Although he also reiterated the customary injunctions against wanton or malicious destruction of private property, there was no mistaking the import of Lincoln’s order.²⁹

Lincoln had decided to act. On July 22, he informed the cabinet of his intention to issue a proclamation of general emancipation. The slaves’ determination had indeed made every policy short of emancipation untenable.³⁰ To those who might raise a voice in opposition, Lincoln declared that he could not fight “with elder-stalk squirts, charged with rose water. . . .” “This government,” he added on the last of July 1862, “cannot much longer play a game in which it stakes all, and its enemies stake nothing.”³¹

On January 1, 1863, Lincoln fulfilled his promise to free all slaves in the states still in rebellion. Had another Republican been in Lincoln’s place, that person doubtless would have done the same. Without question, some would have acted more expeditiously and with greater bravado. Without question, some would have acted more cautiously and with lesser resolve. In the end, Lincoln did what needed to be done. Others might be left behind; Lincoln would not. It does no disservice to Lincoln—or to anyone else—to say that his claim to greatness rests upon his willingness to act when the moment was right.

When Lincoln finally acted, he moved with confidence and determination. He stripped the final Emancipation Proclamation of any reference to compensation for former slaveholders or colonization for former slaves.³² He added provisions that allowed for the service of black men in the Union army and navy. The Proclamation opened the door to the eventual enlistment of more than 179,000 black men, most of them former slaves. More than anything else, the enlistment of black men, slave as well as free, trans-

formed the Federal army into an army of liberation. At war’s end, the number of black men in Federal uniform was larger than the number of soldiers in Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia. Military enlistment became the surest solvent of slavery, extending to places the Emancipation Proclamation did not reach, especially the loyal slave states. Once slave men entered the Union army, they were free and they made it clear that they expected their families to be free as well. In March 1865, Congress confirmed this understanding and provided for the freedom of the immediate families of all black soldiers. Lincoln’s actions, however tardy, gave force to all that the slaves had risked. The Emancipation Proclamation transformed the war in ways only the president could. After January 1, 1863, the Union army marched for freedom, and Lincoln was its commander.³³

Lincoln understood the importance of his role, both politically and morally—just as the slaves had understood theirs.³⁴ Having determined to free the slaves, Lincoln declared he would not take back the Emancipation Proclamation even when military failure and political reversals threatened that policy. He repudiated his misgivings about the military abilities of black soldiers and became one of their great supporters. Lincoln praised the role of black soldiers in preserving the Union and ending chattel bondage and vowed not to “betray” them. The growing presence of black men in the Union army deepened Lincoln’s commitment to emancipation. “There have been men who proposed to me to return to slavery the black warriors of Port Hudson & Olustee to . . . conciliate the South,” Lincoln reflected in August 1864. “I should be damned in time & in eternity for doing so.”³⁵ Lincoln later suggested that black soldiers might have the vote, perhaps his greatest concession to racial equality.³⁶ To secure the freedom that his proclamation had promised, Lincoln pressed for the final liquidation of slavery in the Union’s own slave states where diehards obstructed and delayed. To that end and to write freedom into the nation’s highest charter, Lincoln promoted passage of the Thirteenth Amendment, although he did not live to see its ratification.

The Emancipation Proclamation’s place in the drama of emancipation is thus secure—as is Lincoln’s. To deny it is to ignore the intense struggle by which freedom arrived. It is to ignore the Union soldiers who sheltered slaves, the abolitionists who stumped for emancipation, and the thousands of men and women who, like Lincoln, changed their minds as slaves made the case for universal liberty. Reducing the Emancipation Proclamation to a nullity and Lincoln to a cipher denies human agency just as

personifying emancipation in a larger-than-life Great Emancipator denies the agency of the slaves and many others, and trivializes the process by which the slaves were freed. And, as in many other cases, process is critical.

Both Lincoln and the slaves played their parts in the drama of emancipation. Denying their complementary roles limits understanding of the complex interaction of human agency and events that resulted in slavery's demise. The editors of *Freedom*, who have sought to make the slaves central to the study of emancipation, have tried to expand the terrain of historical understanding, documenting the *process* by which freedom arrived. They have maintained that the slaves were the prime movers of emancipation; they do not believe they were the only movers, and nowhere do they deny Lincoln's importance to the events that culminated in universal freedom. In fact, rather than single out slaves or exclude Lincoln (as the term *self-emancipation* implies), the editors argue for the significance of others as well: white Union soldiers—few of them racial egalitarians—who saw firsthand how slavery weakened the Union cause; their families and friends in the North, eager for Federal victory, who learned from these soldiers the strength the Confederate regime drew from bonded labor; the Northern men and women, most of whom had no connection with the abolition movement, who acted upon such news to petition Congress; and the congressmen and senators who eventually moved in favor of freedom. This roster, of course, does not include all those involved in the social and political process that ended slavery in the American South. It omits the slaveholders, no bit players in the drama. Taken as a whole, however, the new understanding of emancipation does suggest something of the complexity of the process by which freedom arrived and the limitation of seeing slavery's end as the product of any one individual—or element—in the social order.

Emphasizing that emancipation was not the work of one hand underscores the force of contingency, the crooked course by which universal freedom arrived. It captures the ebb and flow of events which, at times, placed Lincoln among the opponents of emancipation and then propelled him to the forefront of freedom's friends. It emphasizes the clash of wills that is the essence of politics, whether it involves enfranchised legislators or voteless slaves. Politics, perforce, necessitates an on-the-ground struggle among different interests, not the unfolding of a single idea or perspective, whether that of an individual or an age. Lincoln, no less than the

meanest slave, acted upon changing possibilities as he understood them. The very same events—secession and war—that gave the slaves' actions new meaning also gave Lincoln's actions new meaning. To think that Lincoln could have anticipated these changes—or, more strangely still, somehow embodied them—imbues him with a power over the course of events that no human being has ever enjoyed. Lincoln was part of history, not above it. Whatever he believed about slavery in 1861, Lincoln did not see the war as an instrument of emancipation.³⁷ The slaves did. Lincoln's commitment to emancipation changed with time because it had to. The slaves' commitment to universal freedom never wavered because it could not.

Complexity—contrary to McPherson—is not ambivalence or ambiguity. To tell the whole story, to follow that crooked course, does not diminish the clarity of an argument or mystify it into a maze of “nuance, paradox, or irony.” Telling the entire tale is not a form of obfuscation. If done right, it clarifies precisely because it consolidates the mass of competing claims under a single head. Elegance or simplicity of argument is useful only when it encompasses all of the evidence, not when it excludes or narrows it.

In the perennial tests in which constituted authority searches for the voice of the people and when the people are testing the measure of their leaders, it is well to recall the relationship of both to securing freedom's greatest victory. In this sense, slaves were right in celebrating January 1, 1863, as the Day of Jubilee. As Loretta Hanes noted 130 years later, “It meant so much to people because it was a ray of light, the hope of a new day coming. And it gave them courage.”³⁸ Indeed, the Emancipation Proclamation reminds all—both those viewing its faded pages and those studying it—that real change derives both from the actions of the people and from the imprimatur of constituted authority. It teaches that “social” history is no less political than “political” history, for it too rests upon the bending of wills, which is the essence of politics, and that no political process is determined by a single individual. If the Emancipation Proclamation speaks to the central role of constituted authority—in the person of Abraham Lincoln—in making history, it speaks no less loudly to the role of ordinary men and women, seizing the moment to make the world according to their own understanding of justice and human decency. The connection between the two should not be forgotten.