

THE WHITE HOUSE
HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

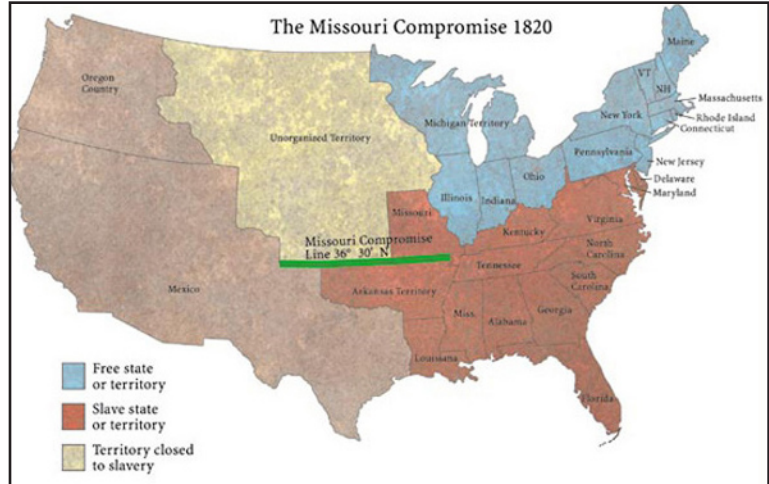
CLASSROOM | 9-12 Lessons :

THENCE FORWARD, AND FOREVER FREE

At the age of twenty-eight, Abraham Lincoln took a stand against slavery in the Illinois state legislature. He called it an “injustice” and condemned the lynch mobs that terrorized blacks and abolitionists.¹ Though he possessed the prejudices of a backwoodsman, seeing slaves as “simple, happy creatures,” he also saw something in 1841 that made an impression on him. On a riverboat on the Ohio River he observed “twelve Negroes . . . chained together precisely like so many fish upon a trotline . . . being separated forever from the scenes of their childhood, their friends, their fathers and mothers.”² Later, as he matured, he remembered that scene, and it troubled him. When he came to Washington as a congressman in the late 1840s, he saw slaves being sold like horses in the slave auctions of the capital city itself. By the time he went back home to Springfield, Illinois, he was of the mind that if slavery couldn’t be abolished, at least it should be kept out of the expanding western territories. Meanwhile, for a time Lincoln supported the ideas of the American Colonization Society, which worked to establish a colony of free blacks, called Liberia, in West Africa. Yet as a means of solving the slavery problem, a return to Africa was highly impractical. In the space of a decade the society had managed to “colonize” fewer slaves than were born in the United States in a single month. Moreover, most slave families had been in America for three generations and did not see Africa as home.³

By the late 1850s, Abraham Lincoln had joined the new Republican Party. It had evolved from disputes over the spread of slavery in the territories still to be carved out of the Louisiana Territory. For awhile it had seemed the Missouri Compromise of 1820, put together by Henry Clay of Kentucky, had tamped down the subject of how slavery would be handled in the lands west of the organized states. That compromise had drawn a line across the Louisiana Territory, at the southern boundary of Missouri, and forbade slavery in the states carved from above that boundary. Then Stephen A. Douglas, U.S. senator from Illinois, sought to develop the Nebraska Territory west of his home state to strengthen his pitch for a northern transcontinental railroad route. Seeking to skirt the emotional issue of slavery, Douglas struck on the concept of “popular sovereignty,” set forth in the Kansas-Nebraska Act. The idea was to take the huge Nebraska Territory, divide it, and “let the people decide” through their vote whether the areas would be slave or free. He reckoned from the beginning that Nebraska would develop as a free state, and Kansas (next to the slave state of Missouri) would become slave, thus each “side” would have its way. What he hadn’t reckoned was the enormous opposition this act would bring. Soon antislavery and proslavery forces alike were descending upon Kansas, mixing blood with the will of the people in what was called “Bleeding Kansas.”⁴





*“Africans on Board the Slave Bark Wildfire, April 30, 1860”
Published in Harper’s Weekly. Library of Congress*

No Hungry Cows in Kansas

Within the major parties, certain people began calling themselves Anti-Nebraska Democrats and Anti-Nebraska Whigs.⁵ Soon the “anti” elements from both groups formed themselves into the new Republican Party, at first a single-issue organization opposing the extension of slavery into the territories. This was to become the party of Lincoln, for his reaction to the Kansas-Nebraska Act was “electrifying,” rousing him “like nothing before,” he had said. “It is wrong, wrong in its . . . effect, letting slavery into Kansas and Nebraska—and wrong in . . . principle, allowing it to spread to every other part of the wide world, where men can be found inclined to take it,” he had insisted. Lincoln scoffed at Douglas’s idea of “popular sovereignty,” saying slave owners were like hungry cows; remove the property fences from the free soil meadows and they will rush in and despoil it. Slavery was an evil, he said, it must be sealed off and asphyxiated.⁶

In 1858, the Illinois Republican convention nominated Lincoln to run against the Democrat Stephen A. Douglas for the U.S. Senate seat. In his acceptance speech, Lincoln delivered what would come to be called the “House Divided” speech. Since the days of the Constitutional Convention, the United States had attempted to live with the “snake of slavery” coiled under its table. Lincoln was delivering the news that this circumstance could not and would not continue indefinitely. The forces on either side of the issue were gearing up, becoming more aggressive—as seen in “Bleeding Kansas.” There would be no continuing balancing act on this question of slavery. It would be decided one way or the other. His words seemed radical and full of foreboding: “A house divided against itself cannot stand. I believe this government cannot endure, permanently half slave and half free. I do not expect the Union to be dissolved—I do not expect the house to fall—but I do expect it will cease to be divided. It will become all one thing, or all the other. Either the opponents of slavery, will . . . place it where the public mind shall rest in the belief that it is in the course of ultimate extinction; or its advocates will put it forward, til it shall become alike lawful in all the states, old as well as new—North as well as South.⁷

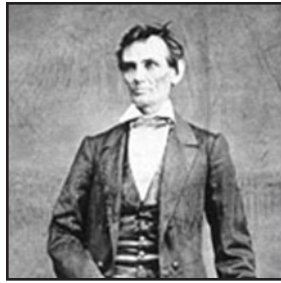


If the nation could not have it both ways—the country would eventually be either slave or free—not both, then a person on the side of ending slavery had to defeat the “popular sovereignty” concept of Stephen A. Douglas. “Popular sovereignty” had the potential to nationalize slavery, to make the nation “all slave.” That, Lincoln believed, was wrong; wrong morally and wrong in the spirit of what he considered the primary founding document of the United States, the Declaration of Independence. As he said in the fifth of a series of debates with Douglas in that campaign:

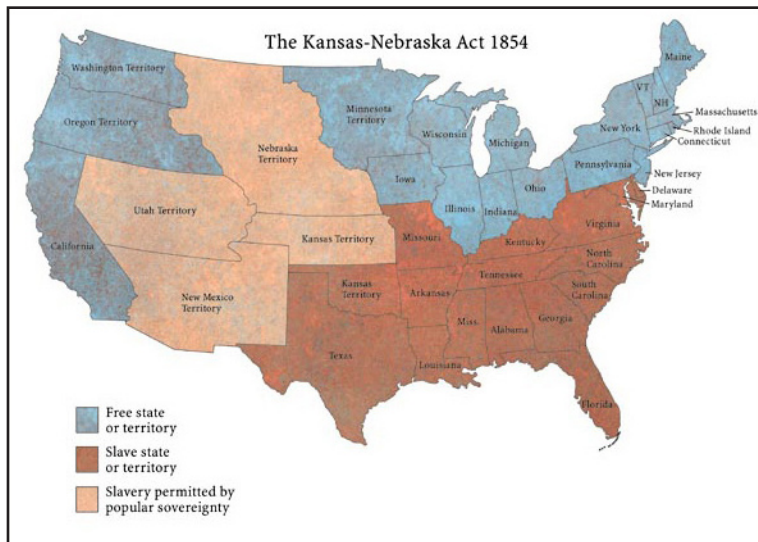
. . . Judge Douglas, and whoever like him teaches the negro has no share, humble though it may be, in the Declaration of Independence, is going back to the era of our liberty and independence, and . . . muzzling the cannon that thunders its annual joyous return; that he is blowing out the moral lights around us, when he contends that whoever wants slaves has a right to hold them; that he is penetrating the human soul, and eradicating the light of reason and the love of liberty . . . he is in every possible way preparing the public mind, by his vast influence, for making the institution of slavery perpetual and national.⁸



Stephan A. Douglas.
National Archives



Lincoln before his
presidency. Library of
Congress



An Imperfect Constitution

Yet even though Lincoln's antislavery views were becoming increasingly vehement, he also believed that the United States was a constitutional government and that the perimeters of that document had to be followed. As far as he was concerned, the Constitution, an imperfect application of the Declaration of Independence, protected slavery in the states where it already existed. The only way to get rid of slavery was to amend the Constitution to abolish it or to restrict it in the territories. Since the national government had the constitutional power to admit states into the Union, he believed it had every right to forbid slavery in those new states. Lincoln was quick to point out that even the Articles of Confederation government had forbidden slavery in the Northwest Territory, a clear indication that many of the men who eventually wrote the Constitution saw the restriction of slavery in western lands as being within the jurisdiction of the central government. He hated slavery, but he also did not want to destroy the Union through violent, and illegal, upheaval. Thus he thoroughly opposed the likes of abolitionists such as John Brown whose methods he believed would destroy the Union. Better to asphyxiate slavery, smothering it gradually in the eastern states where it would eventually breathe its last. In 1860, he explained his gradualist views, using a brilliant "snake analogy." Garry Wills, in *Lincoln at Gettysburg*, provides the story and the annotation:

If I saw a venomous snake crawling in the road, any man would say I may seize the nearest stick and kill it. [*Slavery in itself.*] But if I found that snake in bed with my children that would be another question. I might hurt the children more than the snake, and it might bite them [*Slavery in the South*]. Much more, if I found it in bed with my neighbor's children, and I had bound myself by a solemn oath not to meddle with his children . . . it would become me to let that particular mode of getting rid of the gentleman alone. [*Slavery in the South as seen from the North.*] But if there was a bed newly made up, to which the children were to be taken, and it was proposed to take a batch of young snakes and put them there with them, I take it no man would say there was any question how I ought to decide. [*Slavery in the territories.*]⁹

Taking it out of the context of analogy, Lincoln made his views on slavery very clear on October 15, 1858, during another of the famous Lincoln-Douglas Debates:

So, too, [he is wrong] when he assumes that I am in favor of introducing a perfect social and political equality between the white and black races. These are false issues. The real issue . . . is the sentiment on the part of one class that looks upon slavery as a wrong, and of another class that does not look upon it as a wrong. The sentiment that contemplates the institution of slavery in this country as a wrong is the sentiment of the Republican party . . . and while they contemplate it as such, they nevertheless have due regard for . . . the difficulties of getting rid of it in any satisfactory way and to all the constitutional obligations thrown about it. Yet . . . they insist that it should, as far as may be, be treated as a wrong; and one of the methods of treating it as a wrong is to make provision that it shall grow no larger.¹⁰

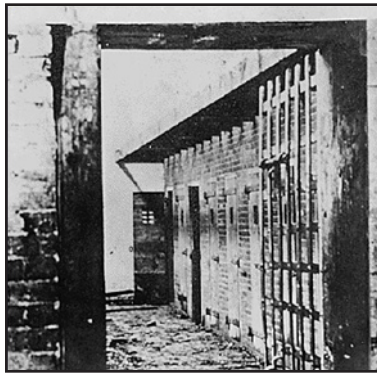
Lincoln did not win in his fight against Senator Stephen A. Douglas. Douglas went to the U.S. Senate in 1858, and Lincoln went back to "lawyering" in Springfield. Yet his name and his message had made an impression that would not be forgotten. By 1860, Abraham Lincoln found himself the Republican candidate for the presidency of the United States.



A Crisis White House

When Lincoln took the oath of office on March 4, 1861, seven states of the Union had already seceded. Within a day of his inauguration he wrestled with a decision to “reinforce” or “provision” a federal fort in South Carolina being threatened by secessionists. The rebellious states had already set up a provisional government in Montgomery, Alabama, and Jefferson Davis had been named its president. Lincoln did not recognize the legitimacy of this “so-called” Confederate States of America and proceeded to use the full force of his war powers to put down what he described as a “domestic insurrection.” (See Student Text, Part 1). At the heart of that civil crisis was this issue of slavery. Within the federal government, opinions differed on what should be done about the “peculiar institution” under these wartime circumstances. Even among the ranks within Lincoln’s Republican Party, there were wildly differing views on how this issue should be resolved.

The radical elements of the Republican Party wanted to seize the opportunity presented by the war to abolish slavery—immediately and decisively. They had the support of some very influential and articulate voices in Congress: Congressman Thaddeus Stevens, Senator Charles Sumner, Senator Benjamin Wade. The conservatives within the party took the view of Lincoln. Slavery should be abolished but in a more gradual way and in a manner that would not antagonize the border states. Lincoln believed the southern states were still in the Union and thus slavery was protected in the same way it had been before the war began. As the South could not decide to secede, so the North could not unilaterally abolish slavery where it was constitutionally sanctioned. In Lincoln’s view, opponents of slavery could criticize it, work for the needed amendment, refuse to accept it as moral, or point to how inconsistent it was with the Declaration of Independence. But while the Constitution’s provisions were in effect, neither the president nor Congress could ignore them.¹¹



A slave pen in Alexandria, Virginia. National Archives



A slave displays the scars of whipping. National Archives



Baby-Steps Toward Freedom

But attacks on slavery were gathering steady momentum in the early years of the war. Lincoln had tried to get the border states to free their slaves through a program of compensated gradual emancipation, but they would not agree to it. A Confiscation Act, passed in 1861, gave freedom to all slaves used for “insurrectionary purposes.”¹² A law in the spring of 1862 abolished slavery, with compensation to owners, in the District of Columbia and in western territories. In July, the Radicals pushed through the second Confiscation Act, an effort to bring about emancipation through legislative action. It declared free the slaves of persons aiding and supporting the insurrection and authorized the president to employ blacks, including freed slaves, as soldiers.¹³ As the war continued, the country seemed slowly to accept emancipation as a primary war aim; nothing less, many believed, would justify the bloodshed and trauma of the prolonged and costly war.

On August 20, 1861, *New York Times Tribune* editor Horace Greeley printed an editorial titled “The Prayer of Twenty Millions,” in which he claimed that the Union cause had suffered from mistaken “deference to Rebel slavery” and accused Lincoln of being unduly influenced by the border states. He further stated that it was preposterous to try and put down the rebellion without, at the same time, getting rid of what caused it—namely, slavery. Lincoln wouldn’t take the bait, writing in a public reply: “My *paramount* object in this struggle is to save the Union, and is not either to save or to destroy slavery.” However, he was quick to add that he intended “no modification of my oft-expressed personal wish that all men everywhere could be free.”¹⁴ Greeley couldn’t have known that already Lincoln had begun work on an Emancipation Proclamation, using in the boldest way yet his powers as the commander in chief. He had already shown the text of the proclamation to his cabinet on July 22. Gideon Welles, Lincoln’s secretary of the navy, had recorded in his diary: “[The president] had come to the conclusion that it was a military necessity absolutely essential for the salvation of the Union.” Secretary of State Seward had convinced Lincoln that at the moment the Union looked militarily weak, General George B. McClellan’s peninsula campaign having failed.¹⁵ Better to wait until the Union had made a better military showing; otherwise, emancipation might be viewed as an act of desperation. After the Battle of Antietam, which was not an impressive Union victory but had at least driven General Robert E. Lee from Maryland’s soil, Lincoln was ready to issue the preliminary proclamation.

A Necessity of War

On September 22, 1862, in a second floor room of the White House, the president read the document to his cabinet. The proclamation’s intent, he said, was “the object of practically restoring the constitutional relation between the United States, and each of the states, and the people thereof.”¹⁶ Though he listened to the comments and suggestions of his cabinet members, he clearly had his mind made up. At the end of a brief discussion with them he sent the document to the secretary of state to be copied and officially published. On September 23 the president gave the proclamation to the newspapers. The public spread the word: all persons held as slaves in states that were still in rebellion on January 1, 1863, would be emancipated! That gave the southern states three months to return to the Union without this outcome should they so choose. Lincoln specifically exempted most areas occupied by federal troops, and he declared that the status of slaves in the Union would be unaffected. Since those states were not in rebellion, he had no authority to end slavery within them. He had no question about his authority to carry out the terms of the proclamation. As Garry

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Wills states, “By emancipating slaves as commander-in-chief of the army and navy, Lincoln was making it clear that he did not act with any other of his (civilian) presidential powers—only Congress and the states could do that, by amending the Constitution.”¹⁷ He was using his war powers. This could not have been clearer than in the document itself:

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. . . . 18

As the historian Richard Hofstadter wrote, “The Emancipation Proclamation of January 1, 1863, had all the moral grandeur of a bill of lading. It contained no indictment of slavery, but simply based emancipation on ‘military necessity.’”¹⁹ Though initially opposed to making soldiers of slaves, Lincoln understood their potential to advance the Union’s military cause. That military potential was clearly expressed in the final emancipation document when Lincoln stated: “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.”²⁰ Though this language seemed to limit the role of freedmen in the armed services, Lincoln soon expanded his view of their military capability. He would declare that freed slaves were “the great *available*, and yet *unavailed* of, force for the restoring of the Union.”²¹ In spring 1863, he urged Andrew Johnson, military governor of Tennessee, to recruit black soldiers predicting that, “The bare sight of fifty thousand armed, and drilled black soldiers on the banks of the Mississippi would end the rebellion at once.”²² Though the war did not “end at once,” the Union army would be made militarily stronger. More than 186,000 freed blacks would serve as soldiers, sailors, and laborers for the United States. Furthermore, the rebelling states would be demoralized—their labor force gone, their plantation economy weakened. Emancipation had another military effect: the British had at one time considered aiding the Confederate cause or at least supporting its independence.²³ Despite Lincoln’s assertions of “military necessity,” Great Britain saw the freeing of the slaves as elevating the war to a higher plane, with the moral position of the South correspondingly weakened. The chance that Britain would ally with the South was greatly diminished by the Emancipation Proclamation.

A First Step

All of those who had worked to end slavery saw the Emancipation Proclamation as a huge first step. There were rallies and celebrations in every major city in the North, complete with torchlight parades and bonfires. The black abolitionist Frederick Douglass, upon hearing the news, said that suddenly, at a stroke, the war had been “invested with sanctity.”²⁴ Eventually many would complain that Lincoln had not done enough, but for the moment it was a great triumph. Though Lincoln understood the limits of his Emancipation Proclamation and believed it was important to place it squarely in that context, his understanding of its moral importance cannot be denied. In 1863, on New Year’s Day, there was a reception at the White House. Throngs of people came, including the diplomatic corps in full court dress. Later that day, when the president was ready to sign the fully engrossed copy of the final Emancipation Proclamation, his arm was so stiff and numb from shaking hundreds of hands

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at the reception he wasn't sure he could firmly sign his name. Lincoln remarked, "Now, this signature is one that will be closely examined, and if they find my hand trembled, they will say 'he had some compunctions.'" But he did not. He told those who watched him affix his signature, "I never, in my life, felt more certain that I was doing right, than I do in signing this paper." As he said, with trembling hand or not, "It was going to be done."²⁵

A King's Cure

In 1864, Abraham Lincoln's Republican friend, Senator Lyman Trumbull of Illinois, had introduced the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution, abolishing slavery and giving Congress the duty of enforcement. That amendment had failed when it reached the House. Lincoln made the reintroducing and passage of this amendment a central issue of his presidential campaign for a second term. After all, the Emancipation Proclamation was a war powers action and most likely would affect no slaves in peacetime; moreover, not one slave in the loyal Union had been freed by the proclamation. As Lincoln had said, it "did not meet the evil."²⁶ This amendment would be the "King's cure for all the evils." By mid-January, Lincoln was doing some serious behind-the-scenes politicking, even offering some political patronage in return for votes. On January 31, 1865, the all-important count was taken in the House. The Speaker announced that the amendment had passed by 119 to 56. A witness to the scene, Noah Brooks, said that for a minute there was total silence, then an explosion of emotion: "Strong men embraced each other with tears. The galleries and aisles were bristling with standing, cheering crowds . . . women's handkerchiefs waving and floating." Outside, "amidst wild celebration," great guns were uncovered on Capitol Hill and fired into the sky, announcing the end of slavery.²⁷ Abraham Lincoln, who had been literally pacing the floor, "all the while in a flush of excitement," was suddenly filled with joy" as he heard the amendment had passed. "The great job is ended," he exclaimed.²⁸ And so it seemed. Months later, with the amendment well on its way to ratification, William Lloyd Garrison, the great abolitionist, publicly gave credit where credit was due: "And to whom is the country indebted . . . for this vital and saving amendment? I . . . answer—to the humble rail-splitter of Illinois, to the Presidential chain splitter for millions of the oppressed—to Abraham Lincoln."²⁹ He could have added, "The Great Emancipator of the slaves."

