

SCRIPT

PATHS TO FREEDOM

Slavery, Emancipation, and the Power of the President



ACT I, Scene 1

Sitting in a parlor, in the summer of 1862, Frederick Douglass is our narrator.

Douglass: Hello. I'm Frederick Douglass.

It is July 22, 1862. America is fighting a Civil War. The Union Army is not doing as well as President Lincoln has expected. President Lincoln says that the rebels must be brought back into the Union. He won't say that this war is about slavery and freedom, but I believe it is. The government could free the slaves and pay the owners for their lost property. This has happened in the Nation's Capital already.

Some say all slaves should be shipped back to a colony in Africa or South America where they could live free. I don't agree with this. They are Americans now. They were born here. The Constitution should protect our people. It should not protect those who own our people.

President Lincoln has many options, but he is moving too slow. Perhaps he's ready to make a decision. This morning he has called his cabinet together for a meeting in his White House office. I hope he is ready to move!

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ACT I, Scene 2

President Lincoln's office and cabinet room on the second floor of the White House, Washington, D.C. Cabinet members are gathered around the conference table, some sitting, some standing. An empty chair at the head of the table awaits President Lincoln, who has not yet arrived.

Welles: Gentlemen, as the Secretary of the Navy, I worry about bringing freed slaves aboard our ships to fight this war. The president must have something important to tell us since he asked us to meet again this morning.

All talk abruptly ends when the President enters the room. He has papers in one hand and his stovepipe hat in the other, which he places on the table as he sits in the armchair at the head of the table.

Lincoln: Thank you for coming. I understand we do not all agree on the slavery question, and I welcome your comments. But, I want you to know I have made a decision.

I proclaim January 1, 1863, as the date on which all slaves living in states fighting against the Union will be forever free. The Constitution says the president is the commander in chief. He must make any decision which will help him win. By freeing these slaves, we can turn them from workers who help the rebel cause, to those who help the Union fight.

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ACT I: Scene 3

There is a moment of silence as the cabinet members look at each other, wondering who will speak, and how to react.

Welles: What about slaves in the border states?

Lincoln: My proclamation does not cover them. In these loyal areas, the commander in chief has no power to free slaves. I don't believe the Constitution would allow it. But three and a half million blacks in rebel territory will be free if the rebels do not come back to the Union by New Year's Day.

Blair: Mr. President. I live in Maryland and this will anger our supporters in the border states. Many of them own slaves. They will think this is the first step towards taking their property. And there are elections this fall! We could lose power in Congress. Or, the other border states could join the Confederacy. Do we really want the nation's capital surrounded by rebels?

Lincoln: Calm down, Mr. Blair. I have considered these dangers. But, it is now time to move ahead.

Stanton: I am in favor of emancipation right now. As Secretary of War, I understand the advantage of transferring the work force of slaves from the Confederacy to the Union. What do you think, Mr. Bates?

Bates: I agree! We should do it now. This terrible war has divided my family. My sons are fighting against each other.... And my family is not alone in facing this heartache. If this proclamation can bring the war to an end sooner, I approve.

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ACT I, Scene 4

Chase: I have supported emancipation longer than most of you. But, this proclamation goes beyond anything I imagined. By New Year's Day? You move too quickly. Imagine three million homeless blacks roaming the nation. Where will they go? How will they find food and clothing? I think it's best to have a slower approach. The generals will need time to organize and arm the slaves.

Stanton: Secretary Chase, I'm afraid your arguments will stop the president from making his proclamation, letting this golden moment go by.

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ACT I, Scene 5

Seward: Mr. President, I approve of the proclamation, but I disagree with your timing. Should you announce it to the world now? Our armies have not done well lately. The public may think that you are freeing these slaves only because you are desperate and have no other solutions. Better to wait until the eagle of victory takes flight. When the Union Army has a victory, then make your proclamation.

Lincoln: Mr. Seward, you always give me wise advice. You may be right. I hadn't thought of this.

Chase: Mr. President, you've changed my mind. The proclamation is better than no action at all, so I will support it. But I agree with Mr. Seward.

Lincoln: Very well. I will wait for a victory in battle. Now I must walk to the War Department to see if there are any telegraphs from my generals.

Lincoln stands, picks up his hat, and departs. The cabinet remains quiet until he has left the room.

Welles: Mr. Smith, you've been quiet. What do you think?

Smith: I hope you won't think I'm disloyal, but I have serious doubts about emancipation. I'll keep quiet for now, but if the President issues the proclamation, I may resign and go home to Indiana. And, I won't be shy about telling people what I think!

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ACT II, Scene 1

The traditional New Year's Day reception is taking place in the Blue Room of the White House. Lincoln walks over to where his wife, Mary, and his son, Tad, are standing to receive the guests who are filing into the elegant room.

Lincoln: You look lovely as always, my dear.

Mary: Thank you. And you look like the weight of the world is on your shoulders, even on this beautiful New Year's Day.

Lincoln: Yes. Since George Washington's time, the people have come to wish their president a Happy New Year. I hope this year will be better than the last one.

Mary: Do you believe your action today will make it better? (*she pauses*) Are you going to sign the proclamation?

Lincoln: I promised my Cabinet I would wait for a military victory before I announced it. The battle at Antietam (Anteetum) this past September gave me that chance. I will keep my promise.

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ACT II, Scene 2

Lincoln turns to his son, Tad, who is dressed in a soldier's uniform.

Lincoln: Well, son, I must begin shaking hands. After three hours my hand will be sore. (*He looks over his son's outfit.*) I see you are wearing your soldier's uniform.

Tad: I have been playing on the roof in the fort Willie and I built to defend the White House.

Lincoln: We all miss your brother Willie. (*pause*) How is your pet turkey, since I spared him from being our Christmas dinner?

Tad: I'm glad I asked you to pardon him. He's a better pet than a meal!

Lincoln: (*Smiling.*) And what trouble are you up to now?

Tad: I'm going to ask our guests for donations for one of Mrs. Keckley's charities, the Contraband Relief.

Lincoln: (*Proudly*) That's a good cause. Good luck, Tadpole.

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ACT II, Scene 3

Lincoln takes his place at the beginning of the receiving line accompanied by Marshal Ward Lamon who introduces him to the officials.

Ward Lamon: Mr. President, may I announce General Burnside, Admiral Foote, and General Thomas.

Lincoln (*speaking to Lamon*): Thank you Mr. Lamon. I met with General Burnside earlier this morning.

General Burnside: I thank you for your valuable time, Mr. President. I have been thinking about your advice, and our discussions about the loss at Fredericksburg.

General Burnside walks away to greet others leaving Admiral Foote and General Thomas alone.

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ACT II, Scene 4

Admiral Foote: I hear there has been some tension between Halleck and Burnside. They both had their turns at leading the army.

General Thomas: There is a rumor that General Burnside told President that he would resign. I hate to say it, but the general's command at Fredericksburg was a disaster. Many of our men were killed.

Foote: Well, it looks like we'll have another new commander. On a lighter note, what do you think of General Burnside's whiskers? They run from his ears to his mustache.

Thomas: I hear they're becoming fashionable. They're called sideburns in his honor.

Foote: He will be remembered more for his "sideburns" than for his military career.

The two officers walk away, chuckling.

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ACT II, Scene 5

Fanny Seward: Mrs. Seward, the White House looks beautiful! And Mrs. Lincoln looks lovely, but I'm surprised she's still wearing black.

Anna Seward: Oh, Fanny, remember, it's less than a year since Willie died. It's right that she still wears mourning clothes.

Fanny: Yes, of course. I'm just so happy that the Lincolns remembered me. They both have so much on their minds. The President is dealing with the war and the slavery issue. I just want this war to end.

Anna: We've both heard enough sad stories around the Seward dining table.

Fanny: Look! There is Kate Chase, looking like a fairy queen in her lace dress. Oh, how pretty she is!

Anna: No prettier than you are, my dear. You look lovely, too.

Fanny: Thank you! I have been waiting for this day since my eighteenth birthday. This is like my introduction to Washington society! I just wish I had the respect that Kate has. She understands politics and can talk to congressmen and generals with ease!

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ACT II, Scene 6

Fanny: Kate, you look lovely.

Kate Chase: Thank you, Fanny. Have you heard if the President has signed the Proclamation? I want this war to end. All the needless killing! My father tells me about all of our losses, and how he would fight the war. My father would be a fine president.

Fanny: Well, for now, Mr. Lincoln is president and we will have to wait and see if he signs the proclamation.

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ACT II, Scene 7

Senator Bayard: Good morning, Senator Sumner (*He offers to shake Sumner's hand.*) What do you think this New Year will bring us?

Senator Sumner (*refuses to shake and says sharply*): Senator Bayard, you know that I hope the New Year will bring freedom to all slaves everywhere! Many of my fellow citizens in Massachusetts agree. I strongly support the President, but his proclamation doesn't go far enough!

Senator Bayard: I still believe that states should be allowed to secede, even though my state, Delaware, has remained in the Union.

Sumner: So far, at least

Bayard: Property owners in Delaware have a right to keep all their property!

Senator Sumner: I was hoping that you would have a change of heart in the New Year.

The two senators stomp off in opposite directions, both convinced that they are right in their contrasting beliefs.

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ACT II, Scene 9

Count Gurowski enters the frame to greet Lyons and Mercier, who have been chatting.

Gurowski: How are you gentlemen doing this fine day?

Lord Lyons: My dear Count Gurowski. Speaking for Britain, it would be finer if this war ends soon. It's best for my country and all of Europe that America is at peace (*pause*) whether America is one or two nations.

Ambassador Mercier: I agree with you. France needs cotton from the southern states. The U.S. Navy is blocking our shipments.

Gurowski: I am more concerned with the poor souls who have to pick that cotton! Both of you represent your nation. I have left my native Poland. My adopted country is America -- a free America, and I strongly support the abolitionist cause.

Gurowski stomps away.

Lyons: (*to Mercier*) How did he get in here?

Mercier: (*shrugs*)

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ACT II, Scene 9

The gates of the Executive Mansion are opened to the public at 12 noon and the crowd arrives. The President remains to greet the more 'common' visitors who come through the doors.

Lincoln: Mr. Rosewater, how good to see you! Are you here to bring me new messages from the telegraph office?

Edward Rosewater: Actually, sir, I came today to enjoy the reception. But I'll return to the telegraph immediately!

Lincoln: (*laughs*) Please enjoy yourself. Perhaps this afternoon I'll have a special message for you to send over the wires.

Rosewater: It will be my pleasure to assist you, Mr. President.

Mrs. Keckley, Mrs. Pomroy and Extra Ladies are chatting in a corner.

Mrs. Pomroy: Mrs. Lincoln looked tired today. She left the reception early. Perhaps I should check on her.

Mrs. Keckley: This is the first public reception she has hosted since Willie died.

Mrs. Pomroy: I know, Mrs. Keckley. I nursed Tad through typhoid fever while Mrs. Lincoln was grieving. She was unable to care for Tad. But I could understand. I lost two children of my own, and my only living child is fighting in this war.

Mrs. Keckley: Well, Mrs. Pomroy, Tad certainly is in good health now. I wish we could say the same for the wounded soldiers in Washington's hospitals.

Mrs. Pomroy: The soldiers' hearts are lightened when Mrs. Lincoln visits them in the hospitals.

Mrs. Keckley: Here comes Tad now.

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ACT II, Scene 10

Tad: Mrs. Keckley, I have five dollars from our guests today. Please take it to help the people in the contraband camps.

Mrs. Keckley: Those poor people have escaped from the south, Tad, and have no place to live. They leave plantations after Union troops come through. This money will help feed them and give them shelter while they huddle here in Washington. Some may stay, and some may drift north. You have a kind heart, Tad.

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ACT II, Scene 11

Because the White House is located close to some of the city's disreputable neighborhoods, pickpockets and other criminals might be in attendance. Also present are some of the Bucktails, soldiers from Pennsylvania who have been assigned to guard the president.

Ward Lamon: With all these people in the White House, I worry about protecting the President.

Captain Derrickson: We must stay as close to him as we can. This is not easy since he believes that all citizens deserve a chance to shake his hand and say hello.

Extras shake hands with President Lincoln, filtering behind Derrickson and Lamon and exiting the scene.

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Act III, Scene 1

President Lincoln has left the reception and is in his office on the second floor of the White House a little after 2:00 P.M. He is soon joined by Secretary of State, William Seward and his son, Fred, the assistant Secretary of State, who are carrying the corrected proclamation in a portfolio.

Lincoln is sitting at his desk. The Seward's stand on either side of him.

Lincoln: Do you have the document? I don't want to delay signing it any longer.

Secretary Seward: Yes, Mr. President. I have just brought it from the State Department.

Seward takes the Proclamation out of a large portfolio and places it before President Lincoln.

As the parchment is laid before him, the President takes a pen, dips it in ink and moves to sign his name on the place for the signature. But he stops and puts the pen down because his hand is trembling.

Lincoln: I never in my life, felt more certain that I was doing right, than I do in signing this paper. If my name ever goes into history it will be for this act. But my arm is numb from shaking hands for three hours.

Fred Seward: That's understandable, Mr. President. You shook hundreds of hands today.

Lincoln: If my hand trembles when I sign the Proclamation, all who examine the document in the future will say, 'He hesitated.' (*he pauses*) But anyway, it is going to be done.

The President waits for a few moments and then takes up the pen, once more, and slowly and carefully signs his name. He looks up.

Lincoln: *Smiling.* That will do.

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ACT III, Scene 2

Frederick Douglass is in Boston later that evening. He is with a crowd of three thousand people at Tremont Temple where he was waiting for the first flash of the electric wires to tell of news of the signing of the Proclamation.

Douglass: While we waited for the news in Boston on New Year's Day, every moment of waiting chilled our hopes. Some said that Mr. Lincoln's kindness toward the South might cause him to change his mind at the last moment. Some thought that Mrs. Lincoln, coming from an old slave-holding family, might convince him not to sign the Proclamation. I didn't believe Mrs. Lincoln would do that.

But at 10 o'clock tonight, the word came over the telegraph wire! The President has not abolished slavery for all time, but this is the first step. After a period of darkness, we now have a dawn of light. We meet today to celebrate.

THE END