

Forever Free: Abraham Lincoln's Journey to Emancipation

Background Essay by John Rhodehamel, Curator

From a genuine abolition point of view, 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 discuss--he was swift, zealous, radical, and determined.--Frederick Douglass, 1876

Racial slavery, along with the lingering prejudice that slavery fostered, remains the central tragedy of American history. Racism is a controversial, highly divisive issue in America today. Discussions of race are often difficult and painful. The memory of the enslavement of millions of people, the ancestors most living African Americans, is deeply disturbing. Our national anguish has deep roots. The founding of the United States left a contradictory legacy of freedom and slavery. In 1776, the year that the revolutionaries announced their independence and proclaimed equality as their guiding principle, enslaved people had already been laboring in America for more than a century. The founders themselves deplored the paradox that had made the United States--a nation dedicated to equality--also home to a system of chattel slavery, based on race, that condemned millions to lives of harsh captivity. The statesmen who drafted the Constitution and conducted the new government through its infancy could comfort themselves with the hope that their descendants would somehow achieve a gradual, peaceful emancipation. Instead, as the United States grew, slavery spread and flourished. The peculiar institution became the cornerstone of Southern society. No longer did slaveholders lament slavery as a "necessary evil." They began to celebrate it as a "positive good." So entrenched, so strongly defended did slavery ultimately prove that its destruction required a second and more sweeping American Revolution--a vast civil war of unprecedented scale and catastrophic violence that desolated the South and killed 620,000 soldiers out of a population of 30 million. The war also killed slavery, but left racism and inequality very much alive in the re-united nation.

At the center of the tragedy of the American Civil War looms the tragic figure of Abraham Lincoln. But although Americans might agree that President Lincoln saved the Union, his role in the final destruction of slavery and the nature of his views on racial equality have always attracted controversy. That controversy has intensified during the past decade. And the argument is not confined to historians and scholars alone. The meaning of Lincoln's leadership is now the subject of strong public interest and of widely reported, often acrimonious public debate. Was Abraham Lincoln really the "Great Emancipator" generations of Americans have been taught to revere? Or did Lincoln reluctantly embrace emancipation only after the actions of abolitionists in the north and enslaved African Americans in the south left him no other choice? Was Lincoln's "paramount object" saving the Union, or freeing the enslaved? Why did emancipation become a Union war aim only in 1862, and how did that momentous shift in policy influence the outcome of the conflict? The traveling panel exhibition **Forever Free: Abraham Lincoln's Journey to Emancipation** addresses these questions and, in seeking to understand the subtleties of Lincoln's complex political strategy, also illuminates the nature of successful presidential leadership in times of national crisis.

Forever Free: Abraham Lincoln's Journey to Emancipation demonstrates that slavery was the underlying cause of the Civil War. The exhibition also shows that it was the slavery controversy that handed the presidency to an unlikely nominee named Abraham Lincoln, a moderate former Whig with no executive experience and little prior claim to national prominence. **Forever Free** suggests that Lincoln himself embodied the paradox of the slaveholding American republic. He deeply hated slavery, hated it "as much as any abolitionist," he once said. But Lincoln could never bring himself to embrace the abolitionists' uncompromising demand for an immediate and unconditional end to the centuries-old evil. Like the founders, like the very slaveholding constitutional republic that he believed could bring happiness to all humanity, Abraham Lincoln was compelled to accept the continuation of the inhuman tyranny of slavery. He could only hope that, confined to the South, slavery would eventually die away. He had even reconciled himself to the possibility that the end of slavery would not come before the mid-twentieth century. Tracing Lincoln's personal journey to emancipation might be seen as a recapitulation of the progress of the nation as a whole towards freedom and equality. **Forever Free: Abraham Lincoln's Journey**

to Emancipation tells how it was that Lincoln, a gradualist who had rejected immediate abolition, became the president who abruptly abolished slavery.

Speaking of his emancipation policy in 1864, Lincoln said that he claimed "not to have controlled events, but confess plainly that events have controlled me." **Forever Free: Abraham Lincoln's Journey to Emancipation** interprets the events that so transformed both Abraham Lincoln and the American republic. Lincoln's journey was one the man himself could hardly have imagined. During the Lincoln-Douglas debates of 1858, the unsuccessful candidate had said that he could accept the prospect of American slavery persisting for another 100 years, so long as he could be sure that the institution was "on a course to ultimate extinction." Lincoln's stance in 1858 could have elicited only scorn and dismay from abolitionists or the enslaved themselves. Yet just five years later, this one-time moderate signed the radical Emancipation Proclamation promising freedom to three-quarters of the all enslaved people in America. It was also in the 1858 campaign that Lincoln, defending against himself against Stephen A. Douglas's race-baiting attacks, had no choice but to declare--in the passage his detractors so delight in quoting--that he opposed equal rights for blacks. Yet, by 1865, just days before his death, President Lincoln declared his support for citizenship for some African American men. Such conversions were, as Lincoln put it in his second inaugural, "fundamental and astounding."

Forever Free: Abraham Lincoln's Journey to Emancipation shows how Abraham Lincoln lived the American dilemma. He believed that slavery was wicked, backward, and an offense to the nation's republican ideals. At the same time, he saw no peaceful way to alter such a monumental and seemingly permanent feature of the national landscape. He knew slavery was evil, but he believed that a direct attack on the institution could only result in an even greater evil, the breakup of the Union and the destruction of the only significant democratic nation in the world.

Abraham Lincoln had been born on the Kentucky frontier in February 1809, the last month of the presidency of Thomas Jefferson, the slaveholder who had so resoundingly declared all men to be created equal. The family soon moved north across the Ohio into the free state of Indiana, in part to get away from slavery. Lincoln's hatred for slavery started so early in his boyhood that he could not remember its beginnings. "I am naturally anti-slavery," he would say. "If slavery is not wrong, nothing is wrong. I cannot remember when I did not so think, and feel." It's not hard to understand his instinctive aversion to what he called a "vast moral evil," a "monstrous injustice." The very existence of bondage in the American republic represented an appalling threat to the ideals Lincoln held most dear.

Despite his humble origins, Abraham Lincoln had become a remarkable young man, set apart by superior intelligence and impressive physical strength and stature. Lincoln would one day describe his formal education with a single word: "defective." All told, he received about a year of schooling. But Lincoln managed to educate himself. He eventually attained a mastery of language unsurpassed by any other American statesman, and indeed, surpassed by only a few literary artists. Lincoln's gift for affirming moral principles in soaring eloquence would one day comprise a vital element of his leadership, and this eloquence--Lincoln's words in his own handwriting--are an important feature of the **Forever Free** traveling exhibition.

The young Lincoln's most important attribute, however, may have been his driving, relentless ambition to rise in the world. Encompassing more than a desire for his own success, Lincoln's brand of ambition was also the principle that became the cornerstone of his political philosophy. He called it "the right to rise." For Abraham Lincoln, an equal chance to succeed in life was the great promise of America. He believed that equality of opportunity was possible only in democratic nation. And like so many patriots before him, Lincoln was convinced of the universality of the American promise. The United States had a special mission to demonstrate the success of popular government in a world still largely ruled by hereditary despotism. So of course he was "naturally anti-slavery." As he put it in a famous speech in 1854, "I hate [slavery] because it deprives our republican example of its just influence in the world--enables the enemies of free institutions, with plausibility, to taunt us as hypocrites--causes the real friends of freedom to doubt our sincerity."

But as much as Lincoln detested the immorality of slavery, he was no abolitionist. He bluntly called abolitionism as a greater danger to the republic than slavery itself. He also stuck to the conviction he would repeat many times, notably in the Lincoln-Douglas debates and in his first inaugural address: that the Constitution gave the federal government no power whatever over slavery in the states. Lincoln first gained national prominence in the late-1850s as a determined opponent of the spread of slavery into new U.S. territories. Never did he so much as hint, however, that the national government should move against slavery in the South. The prominence Lincoln gained in his unsuccessful attempt to unseat Senator Douglas put him on the road to the White House, but it was his previous obscurity and reputation for moderation that allowed him to snatch the Republican presidential nomination away from the several better known contenders. By 1860, the slavery controversy had sundered the Democrats into northern and southern wings. Lincoln's election was virtually assured.

Abraham Lincoln's predicament grew enormously when he took the presidential oath to defend and preserve the Constitution that had always defended and preserved slavery. He had now sworn to protect the institution he hated. More alarming still was the unparalleled crisis posed by secession. Many in the South obviously did not believe the new president's pledges. Although the Republican Party platform of 1860 promised to respect slavery in the states, and even though real abolitionists didn't consider Lincoln an antislavery man at all, he was still considered the "antislavery candidate" in the presidential contest that year. In the South he was considered much more than that. Secessionists claimed Lincoln was a "Black Republican," a disciple of John Brown, a bloodthirsty, firebreathing abolitionist fanatic with a mission to end slavery, enforce racial equality or wholesale negro superiority, and even to force black husbands on white Southern maidens. With remarkable speed, the seven lower south slave states seceded, united in a confederacy, drafted a constitution and put in place a new government. Jefferson Davis was inaugurated two weeks before Abraham Lincoln. The new president made a few attempts to reassure the South, but refused to compromise on the extension of slavery or to back down on Ft. Sumter. And the war came.

Forever Free: Abraham Lincoln's Journey to Emancipation does not present a Lincoln biography or a review of the military history of the Civil War. The show focuses on the president's evolving approach to emancipation, and on the masterful way in which he worked to prepare the northern populace for the end of slavery. The thesis of **Forever Free** is that, from the summer of 1862 on, Abraham Lincoln was the unwavering champion of unconditional freedom for all the slaves in America, and that, until the end of his life, he continued to move toward a recognition that the freed people deserved the rights of citizenship. The exhibit argues that Lincoln succeeded in fooling many of the people, for much of the time. He deliberately concealed the depth of his commitment to emancipation and his growing sympathy for equal rights. President Lincoln was not a reluctant emancipator, even though he took often pains to appear reluctant and hesitant and passive. While events sometimes controlled Lincoln, he was also in control, and his decisions were controlled by his profound hatred for slavery. **Forever Free** reveals Abraham Lincoln as a consummate politician. His seeming reluctance, his apparent indifference to the justice of emancipation, was actually part of a highly successful strategy. (Indeed, one reason Lincoln's legacy remains so elusive today is the very success of his efforts to obscure his goals and motives.)

Lincoln knew that much of the white population of the North remained bitterly prejudiced against African Americans. Most regarded abolitionists as dangerous, irresponsible radicals. Whatever his personal sentiments, a president who hoped to unite the country could not disregard these widely held prejudices. If Northerners believed their president was working for abolition or racial equality, the Union war effort could founder. When freedom came, Lincoln understood, it must come as a war measure, not a humanitarian crusade. (He also knew better than to call the crucial document the "Abolition Proclamation.") There were racists throughout the Union. They could be found not only among the Democratic opposition, but also in the ranks of the army and in the army's top commands, in Congress and the federal departments, in state and local governments, in the press, in the Republican Party, and even in the president's own cabinet. These were the people Lincoln needed to keep on his side. A president planning to adopt emancipation didn't need to win over the Radicals or the abolitionists. He already had them, whether they knew it or not. What he did need was the loyalty of the northerners who opposed black freedom. As often as possible, Lincoln hammered away at the strategic importance of emancipation. He continued to voice support for

colonization, quieting the fears of racists by floating before them the preposterous notion that more than four million African Americans could be persuaded to leave their native land, and, more preposterous still, that a means transporting them all overseas actually existed. His support of colonization infuriated blacks and abolitionists. But their anger didn't worry him. Perhaps the president calculated that enemies like the abolitionists would win him friends among the War Democrats and white supremacists. Abraham Lincoln moved toward emancipation just a step or two ahead of the people; he never moved fast enough to threaten their commitment to Union victory. It was the most brilliantly crafted performance in American political history, a still largely unrecognized achievement that **Forever Free: Abraham Lincoln's Journey to Emancipation** strives to illuminate.



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