Abraham Lincoln, born 1809
From Lawyer to Liberator

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Abraham Lincoln, a name consistently considered synonymous with greatness, evolved from a pioneer boy in the Kentucky backwoods to the famous American President who preserved the Union during the bloodiest war in the nation’s history. Lincoln’s articulation of democracy, emancipation of the slaves, and hard fought preservation of the Union demonstrated his political genius and established a historical legacy the United States would never forget. President Lincoln embraced his position as commander in chief of Union forces and valiantly fought through epochs of despondency and defeat, determined to ensure the survival of the United States. Although Lincoln won the 1860 presidential election on the Republic platform of preventing the spread of slavery, his moral ideology on emancipation and racial equality developed as a result of the experience he gained during the Civil War.

Contrary to mainstream ideology, the Emancipation Proclamation did not end slavery; Abraham Lincoln utilized the measure to gain an upper hand in the war and ensure the preservation of the Union. Likewise, the evolution of Lincoln’s moral character, from lawyer to liberator, advanced his political ideology and led to the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment. Whig principle regarding law and the influence of
prominent party leaders, especially Henry Clay, molded the early years of Lincoln’s political identity. Furthermore, before the presidential election of 1860, Lincoln displayed a traditional perspective on slavery and publicly opposed numerous abolition measures. During the Civil War, Lincoln declared he would rather allow the extension of slavery than see the United States dissolved. Although the Civil War ended slavery, Lincoln considered abolition a secondary objective and placed the preservation of the Union above all else. The large amount of American bloodshed during the war, death of soldiers, and devastating personal losses experienced by Lincoln affected both the mindset of the President and mental stability of his wife, Mary Todd. Lincoln’s unique relationship with abolitionist leader Frederick Douglass furthered the movement for racial equality. Abraham Lincoln’s experience during the Civil War changed his Whig lawyer’s perspective on slavery, and helped the Great Emancipator overcome the constitutional and political obstacles he faced in issuing the Emancipation Proclamation and seeking ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment.

Whig doctrine shaped Lincoln’s political development and influenced his moral ideology regarding slavery and the Constitution. Lincoln asserted his political position within Whig dogma and alleged collective private and state action as necessary for financial stimulus and economic prosperity. Lincoln, also in accordance with Whig principles, believed reverence for the law, including facets many considered prejudicial, essential to maintaining social order and national unity. According to Lincoln, the most efficient means of advancing liberty is through upholding the Constitution and American

Lincoln’s address before the Young Men’s Lyceum of Springfield, demonstrated his commitment to the systematic government fashioned by the founding fathers after the Revolutionary War. Lincoln asserted:

Let reverence for the laws, be breathed by every American mother, to the lisping babe, that prattles on her lap--let it be taught in schools, in seminaries, and in colleges; let it be written in Primers, spelling books, and in Almanacs;--let it be preached from the pulpit, proclaimed in legislative halls, and enforced in courts of justice. And, in short, let it become the political religion of the nation; and let the old and the young, the rich and the poor, the grave and the gay, of all sexes and tongues, and colors and conditions, sacrifice unceasingly upon its altars.

Lincoln’s devotion to the Union stemmed from his belief that the security of self-government through the law was the key to protecting individual freedom. Constitutional doctrine built upon faith in law and Whig fundamentals fixated Lincoln’s political focus on the importance of democracy and self-government.

Whig lawyers considered upholding the legal system and offering aid to persons in need of legal assistance, regardless, of their moral position, a professional obligation. For example, Lincoln acknowledged the crucial significance of railroads for economic stimulation in the West, but never undertook a prominent role in railroad litigation. If the case was brought to Lincoln, he was ready to sue railroad companies, even at the cost of establishing a precedent that compromised his political platform for economic

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2 Ranney, “In Praise of Whig Lawyering,” 1326.
development. Lincoln provided legal service to slave owners and received payment for representing them in court. "Lincoln's opposition to slavery did not prevent his accepting a fee from a slave-holder, any more than his opposition to murder kept him from accepting a fee from a murderer. In the Matson Slave Trial in Charleston, in 1847, Lincoln represented a slave-holder in an effort to send a mother and her children back into slavery," wrote Lincoln biographer William E. Barton. Lincoln clearly disdained slavery and believed the institution could not continue in the United States without causing further damage to the nation, but agreed to counsel for Matson simply because the man needed a lawyer. The Matson case demonstrated Lincoln’s veneration for the law and displayed the Whig lawyer’s revered commitment to defend the interests of his clients, even when such interests conflicted with personal principle.

During the 1858 senate race, Lincoln publicly denounced any affiliation with the abolition movement and denied accusations labeling him anti-slavery. Lincoln explained the distinction between natural rights and civil rights at the Quincy Debate where he reasoned:

…but notwithstanding all this, there is no reason in the world why the negro is not entitled to all the rights enumerated in the Declaration of Independence—the right of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. I hold that he is as much entitled to these as the white man. I agree with Judge Douglas that he is not my equal in many respects, certainly not in color—perhaps not in intellectual and moral endowments; but in the right to eat the bread without leave of anybody else

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which his own hand earns, he is my equal and the equal of Judge Douglas, and the equal of every other man.\textsuperscript{7}

Lincoln’s personal distaste for slavery is evident, but his political stance clearly supported second-class citizenship for blacks in Illinois. Furthermore, Lincoln rejected the opportunity to reproach the infamous Black Laws of Illinois, which found it unlawful for black persons, free or slave, to enter the state.\textsuperscript{8} During his speech at the Charleston, Illinois debate, Lincoln denied involvement with abolitionists and affirmed the superior designation allocated to the white population, Lincoln stated:

\begin{quote}
I am not, nor ever have been, in favor of bringing about in any way the social and political equality of the white and black races—that I am not nor ever have been in favor of making voters or jurors of negroes, nor of qualifying them to hold office, nor to intermarry with white people; and I will say in addition to this that there is a physical difference between the white and black races which will ever forbid the two races living together on terms of social and political equality. And inasmuch as they cannot so live, while they do remain together, there must be the position of superior & inferior. I am as much as any other man in favor of having the superior position assigned to the white race.\textsuperscript{9}
\end{quote}

Moreover, Lincoln indicated that a physical difference between the white and black races made it impossible for social and political equality to exist. At the debate in Ottawa, a region in northern Illinois where the idea of civil rights for blacks was more widely accepted, Lincoln said:

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I have no purpose to introduce political and social equality between the white and black races. There is a physical difference between the two, which, in my judgment, will probably forever forbid their living together on the footing of perfect equality, and inasmuch as it becomes a necessity that there must be a difference, I, as well as Judge Douglas, am in favor of the race to which I belong having the superior position.\textsuperscript{10}

Although Lincoln despised slavery and believed African Americans were entitled to natural human rights, his political statements in the 1858 senate race displayed affirmation for the superiority of the white race and repudiated the idea of social equality for freedmen.

When questioned by Stephen A. Douglas about when slavery would end, Lincoln replied by explaining how a one hundred year decline of the institution would be the most effective method of emancipation. Lincoln based his one hundred year prediction for the decline of slavery on a famous population theory known as the Malthusian model. Thomas Malthus’s model for population growth dictates that if the quantity of land is restricted, an expanding population will produce inefficient returns; labor value will eventually drop to zero, and the community will then be restricted by poverty.\textsuperscript{11} In accordance with Malthusian doctrine, Lincoln argued that if slavery was not abolished where currently institutionalized and not allowed to extend into new regions of the nation, the decreasing ratio of population growth to quantifiable land would result in slaves becoming worthless. Lincoln also explained how the cotton gin perpetuated slavery on economic grounds and altered the original timeline for gradual emancipation.


established by the founding fathers during the drafting of the Constitution.\textsuperscript{12} As late as March of 1862, Lincoln still held this view and presented the South with a proposal for gradual emancipation and offered financial compensation to slave owners in exchange for the removal of slavery.

Prior to the Emancipation Proclamation, Lincoln, who was predisposed by Henry Clay’s model for policy and principle, deemed colonization the most appropriate option for freed slaves. Lincoln considered the prospect of a multiracial nation, much less a multiracial nation providing social and political equality, an exceedingly idealistic enterprise. Clay, a prominent Whig and slave-holder from Kentucky, was active in the American Colonization Society, a national order originated to endorse the relocation of black slaves to a settlement in Africa. In the eulogy to his political guru, Henry Clay, Abraham Lincoln proclaimed:

Every succeeding year has added strength to the hope of [the American Colonization Society’s] realization. May it indeed be realized…If as the friends of colonization hope, the present and coming generations of our countrymen shall by any means, succeed in freeing our land from the dangerous presence of slavery; and, at the same time, in restoring a captive people to their long-lost fatherland. With bright prospects for the future; and this too, so gradually, that neither races nor individuals shall have suffered by the change.\textsuperscript{13}

Lincoln’s basis for the colonization of slaves also derived from the ideology of numerous founding fathers including George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, a man who owned


\textsuperscript{13} Abraham Lincoln, Abraham Lincoln, Slavery, and the Civil War: Selected Writings and Speeches, “Eulogy on Henry Clay,” July 6, 1852 (New York: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2001), 42.
more than one hundred slaves during his lifetime. In 1862, Lincoln met with five prominent African-American leaders and encouraged them to embrace plans for colonization. During the meeting, Lincoln exposed the general role white Americans acted in creating black discrimination. He elucidated: “But even when you cease to be slaves, you are yet far removed from being placed on an equality with the white race…The aspiration of men is to enjoy quality with the best when free, but on this broad continent, not a single man of your race is made the equal of a single man of ours. Go where you are treated the best.” According to Lincoln, a colonization plan consisting of an African-American colony in Africa and an all-white nation in the United States provided egalitarianism for both races.

Lincoln placed the preservation of the Union above all other political goals, including the abolition of slavery. Similar to the mindset of the founding fathers, Lincoln viewed the existence of the United States as a crucial contributor to good in the world and shining beacon of liberty among powerful nations of tyranny and corruption. There is no question that Lincoln hated slavery; he understood it ridiculed the Declaration of Independence and endangered the existence of the Union. However, as an emerging politician, Lincoln compromised on the issue and promised to uphold slavery in the South where the Constitution protected the institution. In the opening statement of his 1854 Peoria address, Lincoln said: “I wish to make and to keep the distinction between the

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existing institution and the extension of it, so broad and so clear, that no honest man can
misunderstand me, and no dishonest one, successfully misrepresent me.”\textsuperscript{17} After the
presidential election of 1860 and secession of southern states, President Lincoln assured
the nation that the objective of the war was to save the Union, not abolish slavery. On
August 22, 1862, President Lincoln addressed a message to Horace Greeley regarding
slavery and the War:

My paramount object in this struggle is to save the Union, and is not either to
save or to destroy slavery. If I could save the Union without freeing any slave I
would do it, and if I could save it by freeing all the slaves I would do it; and if I
could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone I would also do that. What
I do about slavery, and the colored race, I do because I believe it helps to save the
Union; and what I forbear, I forbear because I do not believe it would help to
save the Union.\textsuperscript{18}

Lincoln built his presidential administration on the belief that preservation of the Union
was more important than ending slavery.

On January 1, 1863, President Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, a
radical measure that provided Union forces with a royal flush in the Civil War and
undermined the already failing socio-economic system of the Confederacy. With a single
stroke of his pen, Lincoln issued the most revolutionary measure of his time, the
emancipation of slaves. He realized the emancipation of slaves in rebellious states gave
the North a monumental advantage, both economically and politically. The Republican

\textsuperscript{17} Abraham Lincoln, “The Repeal of the Missouri Compromise and the Propriety of
its Restoration: Speech at Peoria, Illinois, in Reply to Senator Douglas,” Abraham
Lincoln: His Speeches and Writings, ed. Roy P. Basler (1946; reprint, New York: Da
Capo Press, 2001), 283.

\textsuperscript{18} Lincoln, “To Horace Greeley” (August 22, 1862), The Collected Works of
Abraham Lincoln, 5:388.
president knew the South relied heavily on slave labor and economically could not afford resistance from slaves living on Confederate plantations. The Emancipation Proclamation destabilized the Confederacy and elicited nationalism in the minds of Americans across the nation. Although the Emancipation Proclamation itself did not technically grant freedom to any slaves in the South, the political measure invigorated 200,000 blacks, both citizens and former slaves, to take up arms and fight with Union forces. Ergo, Lincoln utilized the Emancipation Proclamation and freed the slaves in Confederate states to cripple Southern resistance, fortify the federal government, and motivate free blacks to join the Union army, hence guaranteeing the salvation of the Union.

The death of soldiers, close friends, and family during the Civil War changed Lincoln’s worldview on life and morality. President Lincoln experienced devastating personal losses during the War and witnessed the terrible consequences death brought upon the people of his great nation. On May 24th 1861, Colonel Elmer Ellsworth, a clerk from Lincoln’s law office and close friend of the family, was shot and killed in Virginia during the federal occupation of Alexandria. Lincoln cried when he heard the news that his friend was shot through the heart for taking down a Confederate flag in an Alexandria tavern. President Lincoln rhetorically asked, “Was it necessary this sacrifice should be made?” Lincoln did not realize this was only the first of many sacrifices he would make throughout the war. A few months after the death of Ellsworth, Senator Edward Baker, a Colonel in the Union Army and Lincoln’s best friend, was killed commanding a group of

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troops during the slipshod Battle of Ball’s Bluff.\textsuperscript{21} The loss of long-time acquaintances combined with the constantly increasing death toll frustrated Lincoln and drove the sixteenth president towards finding the quickest route to Union victory and the conclusion of the war.

Death and depression constantly surrounded the Lincoln family and fashioned sporadic waves of madness and despair. In February 1862, Abraham and Mary Todd Lincoln faced the horrific reality of losing their third son, Willie, to typhus, which was most likely caused by the consumption of polluted water. The loss of Willie propelled them into a significantly more profound state of grief and cast a gloomy shroud over the White House that remained throughout the war. Upon first seeing his son’s dead body, President Lincoln cried, “My poor boy. He was too good for this earth. God has called him home. I know that he is much better off in heaven, but then we loved him so. It is hard, hard to have him die!”\textsuperscript{22} Willie’s death overwhelmed Mary Todd Lincoln, who ostensibly displayed her agony like an albatross and eventually moved away from the White House in an effort to alleviate her pain. Abraham Lincoln’s depression and Mary Todd’s psychological condition changed the President’s viewpoint on the morality of life. After Willie’s death, President Lincoln frequently turned inward and questioned the purpose of the War. President Lincoln’s devotion to securing the Union’s goals never faded, but his moral compass certainly adjusted as a result of the personal losses he encountered. Willie’s death initiated an evolutionary process for Abraham Lincoln that

\textsuperscript{21} Blumenthal, “Lincoln Plays to Win,” 36.
heightened his sense of ethical integrity and forced him to reconsider his stance on emancipation and racial equality.

Additionally, Lincoln’s complex relationship with Frederick Douglass stimulated racial equality movements and influenced the president’s political position regarding slavery and abolition. The affiliation between Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass transformed the future of racial equality in the United States more than any other relationship during the civil rights movement. Douglass, a former slave and self-educated individual, dedicated his life and political career to the abolition of slavery in the United States. He preached anti-slavery sermons at various events in both America and Great Britain, published abolition newspapers, and worked tirelessly to abolish slavery forever. During the long years of the war, Douglass challenged Lincoln’s political resolutions in an attempt to steer the President towards immediate emancipation and equal rights. Douglass and Lincoln did not meet face to face until after the Emancipation Proclamation was issued, but communicated through letters, public statements, and newspapers. Throughout the Civil War, the relationship between the two men oscillated with Lincoln’s fluctuating policies and political statements. As a result of the harsh veracities of war and eradication of slavery in the United States, the relationship between Lincoln and Douglass developed into an admirable coalition where both men held a profound respect for each other.

Although Douglass publicly supported the Republican Party in the 1860 election, he feared the possibility of the Republicans yielding more harm than good for the slaves of the country. Douglass dreaded the idea that Lincoln would not recognize that ending slavery was the only way to preserve the Union. Even though a majority of the country viewed the Republican platform of non-extension of slavery as antislavery, Douglass and numerous abolitionists considered it proslavery dogma. Douglass utilized his newspaper to publish an article, titled “The Late Election”, which sharply criticized Lincoln’s political position and the Republican approach to slavery:

Mr. Lincoln… while admitting the right to hold men as slaves in the States already existing, regards such property as peculiar, exceptional, local, generally an evil, and not to be extended beyond the limits of the States where it is established by what is called positive law. Whoever live through the next four years will see Mr. Lincoln and his Administration attacked more bitterly for their pro-slavery truckling, than for doing any anti-slavery work.24

This political statement by Douglass merely foreshadowed the skepticism and punitive reproaches that lay ahead for Lincoln and his associates. However, Douglass was optimistic and believed Lincoln could be directed towards emancipation and racial equality: "Douglass believed he could turn the Republican Party into an Abolitionist party and Lincoln into an Abolitionist president."25 Nevertheless, both men took different approaches to the war: "The president's mission in the war was to save the Union;

Douglass's was to free the slaves and transform them into citizens." Lincoln repudiated the idea of designating a war for the purpose of ending slavery because he feared it would create an even larger rift in the Union. American historian David W. Blight explains, "At the outset of the war Douglass wanted precisely what Lincoln did not want: a 'remorseless revolutionary struggle' that would make black freedom indispensable to saving the Union." After the Civil War started, both Douglass and Lincoln explicitly battled for their goals: Douglass for abolition and Lincoln for the salvation of the Union by any means necessary.

Abraham Lincoln’s signing of the Emancipation Proclamation brought him more in tune with the ambitions of Frederick Douglass. The political ideologies of Douglass and Lincoln began to merge. Although Lincoln utilized the Emancipation Proclamation as military strategy to save the Union, it also demonstrated Lincoln’s constantly evolving moral character. On August 10, 1863, Douglass traveled to Washington to convene with President Lincoln for the first time. During their meeting, the demeanor Lincoln exhibited not only displayed the immense admiration he held for Douglass but also revealed his changed perspective regarding blacks, both free and slave. This day was undeniably the peak of the relationship between Lincoln and Douglass as it marked the first time in history a black man was personally invited to the White House by the President of the

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28 Blight, Frederick Douglass and Abraham Lincoln, 11.
United States. As the war progressed, Lincoln and Douglass met on numerous occasions to formulate plans for the future of emancipated slaves in the United States.

Even after the Emancipation Proclamation, Lincoln still claimed colonization as the most appropriate solution to the freedmen population issue. Douglass countered Lincoln’s position by insisting that black enlistment in the military was essential for the realization of total emancipation. Douglass, the famous abolitionist, believed freedmen had to, "embrace the opportunity to serve in the military to fulfill and protect their status as American citizens, to prevent a proslavery compromise between the Union and the Confederacy, and to be a part of the 'ennobling and soul enlarging' war for black liberation." Ultimately, Douglass convinced Lincoln that black enlistment must be permitted. Douglass explained that, “if this war...has any lesson for the American people it is to show them the vanity and utter worthlessness of all attempts to secure peace and prosperity while disregarding and trampling upon the self-evident rights and claims of human nature.” The war amalgamated the political ideologies of Lincoln and Douglass, but it was the merging of their moral principles which changed the President’s worldview on slavery and paved the way for racial equality.

The Emancipation Proclamation did not affect the Confederate areas under Union control, or the Border States, and was virtually unenforceable. However, it did establish the flow of antislavery rhetoric and moral integrity squarely behind the Union. This strategically deployed document pushed the Union to victory, guaranteed the preservation of the Union, and prepared the country for the revolutionary Thirteenth Amendment.

30 Ibid., 65.
which abolished slavery in the United States. Lincoln, in accordance with the Republican platform of 1864, endorsed the Thirteenth Amendment and promoted reconstructive measures, which involved freedmen living in the states instead of being shipped off for colonization.\(^{31}\) Furthermore, Lincoln used his reelection victory in 1864 to ambitiously push for the Thirteenth Amendment. He utilized political favors, delivered promises to prominent congressmen, and offered government positions to numerous representatives in the House in exchange for changing their votes and supporting the Amendment.\(^{32}\) Lincoln’s commendable effort paid off on January 1, 1865, when the Thirteenth Amendment was adopted by Congress. Unfortunately, Lincoln would not live to see the Amendment ratified and made an official part of the Constitution.

The Great Emancipator, a title bestowed upon Lincoln after the Emancipation Proclamation, persevered through arduous years of death on the battlefield. He endured hardships that would have destroyed a lesser man, and successfully secured the Union’s salvation. Before ascending to the executive power of the United States, Lincoln built his political identity on Whig philosophy and publicly supported a traditional view on slavery. However, as President his perspective and moral stance on race relations evolved as a direct result of the experience he acquired during the Civil War. The war did not simply change Lincoln’s public opinion of slavery; it transformed his moral ideology from a stringent Whig interpretation of constitutional obedience to a humanitarian worldview regarding liberty and racial equality.

\(^{32}\) Blumenthal, “Lincoln Plays to Win,” 38.