

Civil War And Emancipation

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Introduction

The [American Civil War](#) began as a struggle over secession and the survival of the Union, but slavery was the conflict's central cause and increasingly became its central political and military issue. Abraham Lincoln entered office in March 1861 promising not to interfere with slavery where it already existed, because he believed the federal government lacked constitutional authority to abolish it inside loyal states and because he hoped to prevent the slaveholding border states from joining the Confederacy. That caution did not mean slavery was unrelated to the war. Southern secession declarations and political speeches repeatedly identified the protection of slavery as a fundamental reason for leaving the Union. Once fighting began, enslaved people themselves forced the issue by escaping to Union lines, withholding labor from Confederate owners, sharing intelligence, and demanding recognition as people seeking freedom rather than property to be returned. The war therefore changed through the interaction of military necessity, abolitionist pressure, Black resistance, congressional action, and Lincoln's evolving policy. Emancipation was not one decision made on a single date, and the Emancipation Proclamation did not by itself free every enslaved person. Freedom developed through confiscation laws, military occupation, self-emancipation, state abolition, Black enlistment, the proclamation of January 1, 1863, and finally the Thirteenth Amendment. This transformation is why historians often describe the Civil War as a "Second American Revolution": it preserved the nation while destroying legal slavery and redefining citizenship, federal power, labor, and the meaning of the Constitution. (National Park Service; Foner)

Secession, Union, and the Centrality of Slavery

Lincoln's election in November 1860 alarmed Southern slaveholders because the Republican Party opposed the expansion of slavery into federal territories. Lincoln was not campaigning for immediate nationwide abolition, yet slaveholding leaders feared that limiting expansion would place slavery on a path toward eventual extinction and weaken their political power. South Carolina seceded in December 1860, followed by other Deep South states, and the Confederacy was formed before Lincoln took office. The immediate military conflict began when Confederate forces fired on Fort Sumter on April 12, 1861. Lincoln called for troops to suppress the rebellion, and four more slave states joined the Confederacy. The Union's official war aim was initially preservation of the nation, but the Confederacy's political project was inseparable from the defense of slavery. The distinction between an initial Union war aim and the underlying cause of secession is important. Saying that the North did not begin the war solely to abolish slavery does not mean slavery was a secondary disagreement. It shaped Southern wealth, political representation, westward expansion, and ideas of

racial hierarchy. It also shaped Union strategy from the beginning because enslaved labor supported Confederate agriculture, transportation, fortification, and domestic production. Every Union advance into slaveholding territory raised a practical question: should people escaping slavery be returned, treated as confiscated property, employed by the army, or recognized as free? The federal government could not fight a war against the Confederacy while pretending that the labor system sustaining it was politically neutral.

From Contraband Policy to Preliminary Emancipation

Early emancipation policy developed unevenly. In May 1861, General Benjamin Butler refused to return three escaped enslaved men whose labor had been used for Confederate military work, calling them “contraband of war.” Congress then passed the First Confiscation Act in August 1861, allowing seizure of enslaved labor used directly to support the rebellion. The Second Confiscation Act of July 1862 went further by declaring free certain enslaved people belonging to rebels, while Congress separately abolished slavery in the District of Columbia in April 1862 and prohibited slavery in federal territories. These measures weakened owners’ claims and expanded freedom, though enforcement depended on military presence and local conditions. Lincoln considered a broader proclamation during the summer of 1862. Secretary of State William H. Seward advised waiting for a military success so the announcement would not appear to be a desperate act by a failing government. After the Battle of Antietam in September, Lincoln issued the Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation on September 22, 1862. It warned that enslaved people in states or designated parts of states still in rebellion on January 1, 1863, would be declared free. The policy was justified as a wartime measure under presidential authority as commander in chief. It gave Confederate states an opportunity to return to the Union while announcing that continued rebellion would bring a direct attack on slavery. (McPherson)

The Emancipation Proclamation: Power and Limits

The final Emancipation Proclamation took effect on January 1, 1863. It declared enslaved people in specified Confederate areas “forever free” and authorized the recruitment of Black men into the armed forces. The proclamation did not apply to loyal slave states such as Kentucky, Missouri, Maryland, and Delaware, nor to several Confederate areas already under Union control that were expressly exempted. It did not immediately free people in places where the federal government lacked power to enforce the order. For these reasons, it is inaccurate to say that Lincoln’s proclamation instantly abolished slavery throughout the United States or granted complete civil equality. Its limitations did not make it meaningless. The proclamation transformed the purpose and conduct of the war. Union military success now expanded the geographic reach of freedom, and European governments found it more difficult to recognize or assist a Confederacy openly defending

slavery. Most importantly, the proclamation confirmed that enslaved people's liberation was a Union objective and invited Black men to participate directly in defeating the slaveholders' rebellion. The Library of Congress notes that nearly 200,000 Black soldiers and sailors ultimately served the Union. Their service supplied needed manpower, challenged racist beliefs about citizenship and courage, and strengthened the claim that people who fought for the nation were entitled to rights within it. (Library of Congress, "Emancipation Proclamation")

Black Military Service and the Struggle for Equal Treatment

African American enlistment was both a military contribution and a political act. Units of the United States Colored Troops served in infantry, artillery, cavalry, and support roles. The 54th Massachusetts Infantry became especially famous after its assault on Fort Wagner in July 1863, but it represented a much larger mobilization. Black soldiers performed difficult labor, guarded supply lines, fought in major engagements, and helped occupy Confederate territory. Enslaved and free Black women also served as nurses, cooks, laundresses, scouts, teachers, relief workers, and organizers, although military records often minimized their work. Service did not eliminate discrimination. Black soldiers initially received lower pay than white soldiers, faced unequal equipment and promotion opportunities, and were often assigned exhausting labor. Confederate policy threatened captured Black troops and their white officers with execution or re-enslavement rather than ordinary prisoner-of-war treatment. Black soldiers and abolitionists protested unequal pay, and Congress eventually authorized equal compensation retroactively. These struggles demonstrate that emancipation did not automatically produce equality. The army became a site where Black Americans demanded not only freedom from slavery but recognition as workers, soldiers, citizens, and members of the political nation. (Library of Congress, "African-American Soldiers During Civil War")

The Thirteenth Amendment and the Second American Revolution

Because the Emancipation Proclamation rested on wartime authority and applied only to rebellious areas, a constitutional amendment was necessary to abolish slavery permanently throughout the country. The Senate approved the Thirteenth Amendment in April 1864, the House passed it in January 1865, and the required number of states ratified it in December 1865. The amendment prohibited slavery and involuntary servitude except as punishment for crime and gave Congress power to enforce the prohibition. It ended the legal basis of chattel slavery, including in loyal states not covered by the proclamation. The phrase "Second American Revolution" captures the scale of change but should not suggest that freedom was completed in 1865. Emancipation destroyed owners' legal property claims in approximately four million people and transformed the federal government into an enforcer of personal freedom. Reconstruction amendments later established birthright

citizenship and voting protections. Formerly enslaved people built schools, churches, families, farms, political organizations, and businesses. Yet white resistance produced violence, [Black Codes](#), convict leasing, disfranchisement, segregation, and unequal access to land and work. The exception clause in the Thirteenth Amendment also became connected to coercive penal labor.

The revolution was profound, but its promises were contested and repeatedly narrowed. Lincoln was essential to emancipation policy, but the destruction of slavery cannot be credited to one heroic individual alone. William Lloyd Garrison used *The Liberator* and the American Anti-Slavery Society to demand immediate abolition. Frederick Douglass argued that the war must become a struggle against slavery and campaigned for Black enlistment and equal pay. Sarah and Angelina Grimké linked antislavery activism with women's public participation. Harriet Tubman assisted escape, gathered intelligence, and participated in Union operations. Thousands of less famous activists organized conventions, petitions, churches, newspapers, schools, and aid networks. Enslaved people were the most decisive agents of emancipation. They fled plantations, entered Union camps, negotiated wages, reunited families, enlisted, and provided knowledge of local terrain. Their actions made return to the prewar order increasingly impossible. Describing freedom as something Lincoln simply "gave" to passive recipients hides this agency. The federal government's policies mattered because Black people used them, expanded them, and forced institutions to confront realities they had attempted to postpone. Emancipation was created from above and below at the same time.

Conclusion

The Civil War became a war for emancipation through a cumulative political and military process. It began with a Union government officially focused on suppressing secession, while the Confederacy was organized to protect slavery. Enslaved people's flight, congressional confiscation laws, abolitionist advocacy, military necessity, and Lincoln's changing policy pushed the conflict toward freedom. The Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation was issued on September 22, 1862, and the final proclamation took effect on January 1, 1863. It applied to designated rebellious areas, not the entire nation, but it transformed the war and opened formal military service to Black men. The Thirteenth Amendment completed legal abolition nationwide in 1865, while Black soldiers, families, and communities gave emancipation its practical meaning. The Civil War deserves to be called a Second American Revolution because it destroyed the largest system of human property in the country and altered the Constitution's relationship to freedom. It also left unfinished questions about citizenship, labor, race, punishment, and equality. Understanding both the achievement and the limits of emancipation prevents the history from becoming either a simple celebration or a story of inevitable progress.

References

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