

The American Civil War, A Controversial Historical Event

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Introduction

Human history is marred with conflict and war. As humans have evolved, so has warfare. If the earliest conflicts were for resources, the modern ones are based on ideologies. War is always surrounded by controversies and hidden agendas (Gates, 2022). Over the years, the United States has been a part of various battles and wars. However, one of the most decisive and controversial of these moments was the Civil War. The Civil War began in 1861 between the then-northern states, known as the Union, and the southern states, known as the Confederate. The four-year-long conflict saw ravaging losses of life and infrastructure (Winn, 2020). Although multiple historical, political, and economic factors contributed to the war, the period of Abraham Lincoln's presidency is considered a key factor in the war. The southern states wanted to maintain their freedom and were not happy with many federal policies. With Lincoln gaining the majority in his presidential elections without the support of the South, it became clear that the South was losing its influence and control. Therefore, the southern states seceded from the Union to maintain their political, economic, and social freedom (Kelly, 2020). The war began for different reasons; however, as the war progressed, narratives and objectives changed, and it became the tool to end slavery in the United States.

Background

The Civil War acted as a catalyst for the formation of the American nation as it is today. However, the events that led to it were developed over decades. Since the [American Revolution](#), when the United States ended British control and Thomas Jefferson expanded into the northern territories, the divide between the North and South had begun. Before the American Revolution, the colonies relied heavily on slavery. Slavery had an institutional standing as a social and economic system in the southern colonies. This also created the basis of racial discrimination and the notion of white supremacy in their society. The northern colonies did not practice slavery as it was being done down in the south. Also, there was a growing movement for the abolition of slavery since Britain abolished slavery in 1806. Migrants coming from Europe to the northern colonies were against slavery. Unlike the South, the northern colonies did not rely on agricultural plantations but rather on manufacturing and industry. Thus, these multiple factors that were practised and perceived differences between North and South started creating a divide between them (Kelly, 2020).

When Abraham Lincoln was elected in 1860, the US was a boiling cauldron of political, racial,

economic, and social elements. He was the first republican president elected, and the southern colonies were quick to secede after his election. The 11 states that seceded formed the Confederate States of America. The secession was made formal when the Confederate states elected their president, Jefferson Davis. At this point in history, Lincoln only wanted to resolve the issue, and in his inauguration speech on March 4, 1861, he declared that he would not abolish slavery in the existing states. The military of South Carolina took control of a federal fort, which led to a series of events unravelling into a war (Freeman, n.d.).

Two years into the war, Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation that declared all enslaved black people in the Confederate States free men. This move changed the tone of the war, from protecting the Union to becoming a war for freedom. The black men were conscripted into the army, which made the federal army bigger and stronger (National Archives, 2015).

Lincoln's Initial Argument

When Lincoln was elected to office, he did not make any claim or commitment to ending slavery. He did, however, believe that slavery was immoral and inhumane. When the civil war started, it was to protect the power and sovereignty of the Union. He proposed to end slavery by compensating slave owners in the states that had sided with the Union rather than the Confederacy. However, as the war progressed, Lincoln's approach to slavery also changed. He issued the Emancipation Proclamation, abolishing slavery in the rebelling states. This was initially used as a military tactic where the government offered to pay for the freedom of African Americans if they joined the army. Slaves escaped their masters, and many black people joined the army of the Union. Lincoln, through the course of the war and his presidency, had started to envision how he could undermine slavery, which was posthumously achieved through the 13th Amendment (Hylton, 2013).

Passing of Militia Act

Congress passed the Militia Act in 1862, which allowed black men to be conscripted into the army. The free black men in America could not enlist in the military before this time. When the act was passed, black people saw it as an opportunity to fight for their freedom. Many escaped the harsh life of the plantation and brutal masters and joined the army. Some 200,000 black Americans joined the federal army. This paved the way for the Emancipation Proclamation, whereby slavery in the Confederate States was abolished. This also became a turning point for how the war was perceived. It became a war of freedom. Congress knew that this measure may be questioned or considered a wartime measure and may lose its legitimacy post-war. Therefore, bypassing the law for the 13th Amendment, they ensured that slavery was permanently abolished in the United States (Searles, 2020).

Inhumane Treatment of Slaves (Lincoln's Argument)

As a member of Congress, Lincoln supported the idea that slavery should not be part of the northern states. He believed that all the states should be united on the idea, as half of them supported slavery and the other half not allowed it would eventually cause a divide. Like Thomas Jefferson, he also supported the idea that slavery should be contained in the states where it was practised and not allowed to be spread in the new free states. In his early political career, he was clear and vocal about the fact that his dislike of slavery did not mean that he proposed equality for blacks. Yet still, he believed that based on physical differences, one group cannot be denied a chance at a better life. Lincoln, in his various personal accounts, reflected how seeing chained slaves haunted him and how he considered slavery an injustice of the highest magnitude (Current, 2022).

Although Lincoln's effort to free the slaves may not have been due to self-interest, as the war progressed, his views changed. His numerous personal notes and letters some of which are published under the title "*Lincoln in Private*" reveal how he considered slavery a contradiction to justice. He also recorded his anguish with writers who supported slavery (White, 2021). In his numerous personal correspondences over the years, he mentioned how much he disliked slavery. In one of his letters to Joshua Speed, Lincoln wrote that slavery was not a reflection of the ideals that the founding fathers had for the nation. He also wrote that we have rephrased the declaration of all men being equal to all men being equal except negroes (*Abraham Lincoln's 1855 Letter to Joshua Speed*, 2008).

In another letter that he wrote to Henry Pierce, he expressed his view that the principles that were laid by Thomas Jefferson were the principles of a free society. He wrote that the hypocrisy of people is nothing but obvious lies, and if a white person would not like to be a slave, then he should also equally dislike keeping a slave. His letter continued to say, "*Those who deny freedom to others, deserve it not for themselves; and, under a just God, can not long retain it*" (*Abraham Lincoln's Letter to Henry L. Pierce*, 2008).

Elaboration of Viewpoint

Lincoln's dislike for slavery moved from a private to a very public view after the first year of his presidency. Even before becoming the president, he was one of the first people to propagate the idea of compensating for emancipation so that it could gradually be ended. As the war progressed, his aversion and the aim to abolish it strengthened. Although he was equally aware of the political challenges his move would bring, he knew that the way forward was to end the institution of slavery. During his second inaugural address in 1865, Lincoln said that both Union and Confederate read the same Bible and believed in and prayed to the same God to help them against each other during the war. However, humans are here to serve God's purpose. He punishes our offences, and slavery is the offence for which we have been punished with a war (*Abraham Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address*,

2008).

Lincoln also believed the United States was founded on the idea of universal freedom or the freedom of mankind, and therefore, slavery was a total contradiction of these founding ideals. As he said, if one does not want to be a slave, one can also not be the master. He advocated that democracy is the institute that is supposed to elevate the people, and any institute that degrades and belittles them is not democratic. In one of his letters to James S. Wadsworth, Lincoln described how he believed that slavery could not be abolished without amnesty and suffrage. He believed that thinking that black people were not intelligent just because of their skin colour was the kind of discrimination that had emerged in society because of slavery. He believed that the people, especially the ones who had fought bravely in the Union ranks, should be granted the right to vote and also access to education. As a president, he was the guardian of his nation, and as a Christian, it was his religious duty to provide these opportunities to men who had honoured the flag and country (Lincoln, 2001).

Although Lincoln knew the challenges that the Emancipation Proclamation would create post-war, his untimely assassination did not provide the world with a chance to see the great leader addressing that challenge. Slavery had long been practised on the continent of North America since the British founded the 13 colonies on the East Coast of the USA. Since 1619, when the first ships arrived, it took them more than two centuries to end the inhumane treatment of fellow human beings. Lincoln showed how a leader can transform a nation if he has a vision. The abolition of slavery was probably just the first step, but it could not stop the ill-treatment of people of colour. The Militia Act may have allowed the conscription of blacks into the Union Army, but it did not stop the racial discrimination against them. They were paid less than their white counterparts and given supportive tasks rather than honourable battlefield duties (Editors, 2022).

After the war ended, the Reconstruction movement started in 1866 to support the Southern colonies so that they could become part of the Union again. Also, it was aimed at facilitating the transition of black people as free and useful members of society. However, this movement was not welcomed by the South (*Reconstruction and Its Aftermath*, 2008). They later introduced the black code with the purpose of limiting opportunities for the black population so that they would remain available for labour. By 1870, the southern states became part of the Union again, but numerous groups that supported white supremacy had emerged in the South, leading to an end of reconstruction in 1877.

This was then followed by [Jim Crow Laws](#), which became the basis of racial and systemic discrimination in the Southern colonies. African Americans were rated as second-class citizens and were segregated in all aspects of social, economic, and political life. Jim Crow Laws used the same racial biases that had given birth to white supremacy. They were based on the ideals that black people were cursed or born to be slaves and were inferior in their intelligence, morals, and behaviours because of their skin colour. This racial segregation went on for another century, subjecting the black population to humiliation and discrimination. During this period, many public facilities had put up signs that they did not provide service to black people. Similarly, many public places had clear signage where black people were supposed to sit or stand so that white people would not have to

interact with them in any way. Some of these practices were not even laws but rather more of a common social understanding as a way to keep blacks away from white people. These laws eventually perpetuated to create a system that supported racism, including not just societal prejudices but also discrimination in legal, financial, educational, and economic opportunities (Pilgrim, 2000).

What is sad is that these biases have still not ended, and even today, we constantly see how people of colour still ask for justice in the simplest of scenarios. They still face hate crimes and target killing.

Concluding Thoughts

Given how Lincoln may have been reluctant to address the problem of slavery more directly during his early political career, one can understand the kind of hold the institute of slavery had on the people. His initial purpose in allowing black conscription was probably to weaken the South, but his preceding years in office made him see the need to end slavery. He considered it his constitutional role to protect the Union, and it was clear that if the Union could be protected without freeing slaves or by freeing all slaves, he was ready to do so. But at the same time, in his personal view, he has always disliked the practice. His eventual strong stance on ending slavery was the first step in providing a better life to people of colour. The idea that another human is mistreated and denied a better life just because of his skin colour is abhorrent. As slaves, these people had been subjected to worse treatment physically and mentally without consideration of age and gender. The justification for using a person's skin colour against him seems so absurd, yet it was the basic argument for the practice of slavery and discrimination for approximately three centuries.

Lincoln is hailed as one of the greatest leaders of his time. Even though his rule was cut short by his assassination, he achieved something that people could not achieve in a lifetime. His decision to end slavery changed the lives of so many people. All humans have the right to live a free life; no one should be enslaved against their will.

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