

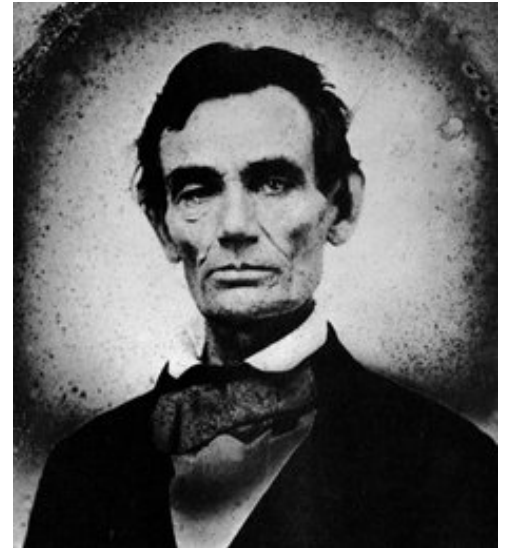
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'A Bombshell on the American Public'

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After Antietam, in September 1862, and the battle of Perryville in Kentucky the following month, which forced a Confederate army to retreat from that state, Union fortunes again took a turn for the worse. Democrats made gains in the fall elections of 1862, though the Republicans retained control of Congress. Instead of strengthening the Union cause abroad, as Lincoln had expected, the preliminary proclamation actually seemed to harm it, as Seward had feared. One clause in the edict gave critics, especially in Britain, an opportunity to misrepresent the document as an incitement to slave insurrection. The army and navy, said Lincoln, "will do no act or acts to repress [slaves] in any efforts they may make for their actual freedom."



T.P. Pearson

Abraham Lincoln, 1858

Lincoln meant only that the US army should not turn escaping slaves away from Union lines. But Southerners, Democrats, and the *Times* of London among other foreign newspapers jumped on these words and branded Lincoln another John Brown. With this proclamation, declared the *Times*, Lincoln

will appeal to the black blood of the African; he will whisper of the pleasures of spoil and of the gratification of yet fiercer instincts; and when the blood begins to flow and shrieks come piercing through the darkness, Mr. LINCOLN will wait till the rising flames tell that all is consummated, and then he will rub his hands and think that revenge is sweet. ⁶

In December 1862 the disastrous Union defeat at Fredericksburg, in Virginia, was followed by a Cabinet crisis in which Republican senators tried to force Lincoln to get rid of Seward as secretary of state and reorganize his Cabinet. Combined with Democratic gains in the

elections, these events “ignited rumors that Lincoln would in fact blink and let the January 1 deadline pass without signing the order at all,” according to Holzer. His wife, Mary Lincoln, urged him not to sign. But Lincoln’s closest associates were confident that he would not back down. A New York Republican commented that “every conceivable influence has been brought to bear on him to influence him to withhold or modify—threats, entreaties, all sorts of humbugs, but he is as firm as a mule.” And so he was. On New Year’s Day, after shaking hands for three hours at the annual White House reception, Lincoln retired to his office and signed the historic document. “If my name ever goes into history it will be for this act,” he declared, “and my whole soul is in it.”

The final proclamation exempted from emancipation the border states and some parts of Confederate states controlled by Union forces. They were deemed not to be at war with the United States; therefore the president’s power as commander in chief to seize enemy property could not apply to them. These exemptions gave rise to the accusation that Lincoln “freed” the slaves in areas where he had no power, and left them in slavery where he did have power.

Nothing could be more wrong. For one thing, tens of thousands of ex-slaves lived in parts of the Confederacy that were occupied by Union forces but were not exempted from the proclamation. They celebrated it as their charter of freedom. For that matter, so did many slaves in exempted areas, which included the four slave-holding states that never left the Union (Missouri, Kentucky, Delaware, and Maryland) as well as Confederate areas that had been returned to Union control, such as New Orleans and the forty-eight Virginia counties that would soon become West Virginia. They recognized that if emancipation took hold in the Confederate states, slavery could scarcely survive in the upper South.

The proclamation officially turned the Union army into an army of liberation—if it could win the war. And by authorizing the enlistment of freed slaves in the army, the final proclamation went a long step toward creating that army of liberation. If the Emancipation Proclamation was merely a piece of paper that did not actually free anyone, as skeptics then and later charged, the Declaration of Independence was likewise a mere piece of paper that did not in itself create a new nation. Both outcomes depended on victory in a war to which these documents gave new purpose.

To mollify the critics who had charged the preliminary proclamation with an intent to incite insurrection, Lincoln omitted from the final text the phrase about doing no act to repress any effort by slaves to achieve freedom, and substituted: “And I hereby enjoin upon the

people so declared to be free to abstain from all violence, except in necessary self-defence.” The final version also described emancipation as “an act of justice, warranted by the Constitution, upon military necessity”—which met criticism that the preliminary edict was informed by no convictions of justice.

These changes helped produce an outpouring of support abroad for the Northern cause that now embraced freedom as well as union. Henry Adams, secretary to his father, who was the American minister to the United Kingdom, reported that “the Emancipation Proclamation has done more for us here than all our former victories and all our diplomacy. It is creating an almost convulsive reaction in our favor all over this country.” Similar reports came from elsewhere abroad. The American minister to the Netherlands wrote that “the anti-slavery position of the government is at length giving us a substantial foothold in European circles.... Everyone can understand the significance of a war where emancipation is written on one banner and slavery on the other.”⁷

But what would happen after the war? The proclamation was a war measure that would cease to have any force in peacetime. What about the exempted areas? Even in the Confederacy, the proclamation might free many slaves but it did not abolish slavery as an institution. By 1864 Lincoln and his party had committed themselves to a constitutional amendment to end the institution of slavery everywhere in the United States. When Congress finally adopted the Thirteenth Amendment, holding that “Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude...shall exist” within the US, and sent it to the states in 1865, Lincoln pronounced it “a King’s cure for all the evils. It winds the whole thing up.” It was the King’s cure he was never to see ratified.

Holzer and Masur would surely agree with David Von Drehle that 1862 was the year of Lincoln’s “rise to greatness,” a year that began with

the American experiment...on the brink of failure... But when the first day of January came around again...[Lincoln] had steered himself and the nation from its darkest New Year’s Day to its proudest, and in the process Lincoln had become the towering leader who forever looms over the rebirth of the American experiment.

In occasionally breathless prose, Von Drehle recounts the dramatic military and political events of that year, interspersing them with human-interest stories of ordinary people caught up in extraordinary times.

The organizational structure Von Drehle has chosen to narrate these events is strictly chronological, with each chapter devoted to a single month. In less skillful hands such a structure might produce a dull, mechanical recitation of facts parading stodgily across the pages. But Von Drehle makes these pages crackle with life and energy. The narrative for February swings from the lavish White House dinner for hundreds of guests on the 5th to the capture of Forts Henry and Donelson on the 6th and 16th, back to the despair of the Lincolns at the death of their eleven-year-old son Willie from typhoid fever on the 20th to the fiasco of General McClellan's use of pontoon boats to bridge the Potomac River at Harpers Ferry. They proved too wide by inches to fit through the outlet lock from the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal. "I am no engineer," Lincoln told McClellan's chief of staff on the 27th,

but it seems to me that if I wished to know whether a boat would go through a hole, or a lock, common sense would teach me to go and measure it. I am almost despairing. Everything seems to fail! The general impression is growing that the General [McClellan] does not intend to do anything. By a failure like this we lose all the prestige we gained by the capture of Fort Donelson.

Lincoln's problems with McClellan form one of the main narrative strands of Von Drehle's book, and nobody has woven that strand more clearly into the events of 1862 than Von Drehle. For his part, McClellan repeatedly blamed lack of support from the Lincoln administration for his military reverses. A Democrat, McClellan did not like the turn toward a "hard war" of subjugation, emancipation, and confiscation of Southern property that took place in 1862. The general even toyed with the idea of publicly opposing the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation. Northern Democrats were already exploring with McClellan the prospect of his running for president in 1864. Some of them, plus an alarming number of officers in McClellan's military entourage, were even urging him to "change front on Washington" and carry out a coup to place himself at the head of the government.

Von Drehle takes seriously this threat of a military dictatorship under McClellan, and Richard Slotkin takes it even more seriously in *The Long Road to Antietam*, in which he depicts the growing divergence between Lincoln and his principal army commander over war aims and strategy. McClellan wanted to restore the Union of 1860; Lincoln now prosecuted the war to destroy slavery and the social order it sustained, and to build a new order on the ruins of the old. "The idea of a military dictatorship was not an idle fancy,"

Slotkin maintains. “The possibility of dictatorship would define the stakes in the personal and political conflict between President Lincoln and General McClellan.”

This may overstate the case. It is quite true that in letters to his wife and to political associates, McClellan referred to having received “letter after letter... conversation after conversation... alluding to the Presidency, Dictatorship etc.” After the failure of his Peninsula campaign in the summer of 1862, which he attributed to the Republican administration’s machinations to make sure that he did not succeed, McClellan told his wife that he had been gratified to receive “letters from the North urging me to march on Washington & assume the Govt!!” It is also true that Lincoln had to treat McClellan gingerly because of the general’s strong Democratic constituency in the North and his popularity in the army.

But when Lincoln finally removed McClellan from command in November 1862, “there was some grumbling in the ranks,” according to Von Drehle, “and some rifles flung to the ground in protest, but the long-feared military coup never materialized.” Nothing in McClellan’s tenure of command became him like his leaving of it. “Stand by General Burnside [his replacement] as you have stood by me,” he told soldiers who did not want to let him go, “and all will be well.”

McClellan rode off into the sunset, but returned two years later to run for president against Lincoln. He lost that battle too, prompting a Union naval officer to comment wryly that “McClellan meets with no better success as a politician than as a general.”⁸ Ironically, McClellan’s limited victory in the Battle of Antietam had given Lincoln the chance to issue the Emancipation Proclamation, the most powerful symbol of “the shift from a strategy of conciliation to a war of subjugation,” according to Slotkin, “a shift that required the permanent sidelining of General McClellan.” Only then could the war become not merely a struggle to preserve the nation launched in 1776, but one to give that nation “a new birth of freedom.”

1. 6
Times, October 7, 1862. ↩

2. 7
Henry Adams to Charles Francis Adams Jr., January 23, 1863, in *The Letters of Henry*

Adams, Vol. I: 1858–1868, edited by J.C. Levenson et al. (Harvard University Press, 1982), p. 327; James Shepherd Pike to William H. Seward, December 31, 1862, quoted in Dean B. Mahin, *One War at a Time: The International Dimensions of the American Civil War* (Brassey's, 1999), p. 139. ↩

3. 8

Aboard the USS Florida, 1863–1865: The Letters of Paymaster William Frederick Keeler, US Navy, to His Wife, Anna, edited by Robert W. Daly (US Naval Institute Press, 1968), p. 200. ↩

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The term bombshell is a forerunner to the term "sex symbol" and originally used to describe popular female sex icons. In modern usage, bombshell refers to a very attractive woman. The Online Etymology Dictionary by Douglas Harper attests the usage of the term in this meaning since 1942, and in the meaning of "shattering or devastating thing or event" since 1860. [Video Description]The American Bombshells are a modern day twist on the Andrews Sisters. Theyâ€™ll be performing Central New York for a Veterans Day Celebration. Go here â†’ [<http://www.961theeagle.com>] Like us â†’ [<http://www.facebook.com/961TheEagle>] Follow us â†’ [<https://twitter.com/961theeagle>] Get our newsletter â†’ [<http://www.961theeagle.com/newsletter>]. For any licensing requests please contact [utica.youtube@townsquaremedia.com]. Nevertheless, the proclamation landed like a bombshell on the American public. Republicans praised it, Democrats denounced it, some officers and soldiers in the Union army welcomed it, others including General George B. McClellan privately condemned it, many in the border states reprehended it, Southern whites ridiculed it, and blacks both free and slave thanked God and Abraham Lincoln for this righteous decree.â€” The American minister to the Netherlands wrote that â€œthe anti-slavery position of the government is at length giving us a substantial foothold in European circlesâ€. Everyone can understand the significance of a war where emancipation is written on one banner and slavery on the other.â€”7. But what would happen after the war?