

THE EMANCIPATION PROCLAMATION

The Emancipation Proclamation was a document that proclaimed the freedom of the slaves in states then in rebellion against the United States in 1863. Described as “the most important and most controversial executive document of Abraham Lincoln’s Presidency,” Lincoln himself thought such an idea unconstitutional in 1861. Slaves, after all, were personal property, which Lincoln was sworn to defend. However, Lincoln ultimately was convinced that the only way to deal with the issue of slavery was in the form of a politically acceptable document.

In mid-June of 1862 Lincoln read a draft of the proclamation to Vice President Hannibal Hamlin and told William H. Seward (Secretary of State) and Gideon Wells (Secretary of the Navy) about it later that summer. Members of the cabinet were shocked by the President’s proposal, and with good reason. By proclaiming that the Civil War was being fought, in essence, to free the slaves, Lincoln was moving drastically from the policy of fighting the war to reunite the nation.

After a great deal of discussion among cabinet members, it was decided to issue the document only after a Union victory, which, up until that time, had not been achieved. Seward said that if issued prior to that the action would appear as the “last measure of an exhausted government.”

The first Union victory, of sorts, was the Battle of Antietam, and on September 22, 1862 Lincoln issued the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation. On the morning of January 1, 1863 Lincoln issued the revised Emancipation Proclamation to mixed reviews from the North, South and foreign sources.

Never universally accepted at its issuance, the Emancipation Proclamation changed the course of the war and freed at least 200,000 slaves by February 1865.



The First Reading of the Emancipation Proclamation, by F.B. Carpenter

For a Printer friendly version of Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation:
http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/featured_documents/emancipation_proclamation/