

The Evolution of Northern Views on Slavery During the US Civil War

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The course of the US Civil War witnessed the emancipation of enslaved Black people and a proposed Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution to abolish slavery. For the Union, the experience of a brutal war fought against a Confederacy whose goal was to preserve slavery, as well as the emancipation and acceptance of Black soldiers into the Union army, shifted many Unionists' views on enslavement to a negative light. Throughout the Civil War, many Northern politicians and middle-class society's views on slavery shifted from apathy, support or distaste to outright abolition; the same was true for soldiers and the working class. However, it is a mistake to view this phenomenon as all-encompassing or a complete break from the prejudices of the past, for not all white people relinquished their support for slavery, and Black people were still predominantly treated as inferior by the white population.

Many middle-class people and politicians' support for emancipation and abolition grew throughout the Civil War. Illustratively, in Lincoln's first inaugural address in March 1861, a month prior to the outbreak of war, addressing the secessionists, Lincoln says, "I have no purpose, directly or indirectly, to interfere with the institution of slavery in the States where it exists. I believe I have no lawful right to do so, and I have no inclination to do so."¹ The president entered into the war without the intention of emancipating enslaved people. It would take the conflict to change his and others' stance on the issue of Black enslavement. Even months into the war, nearly all of Congress opposed interfering with slavery. For example, Congress passed the Crittenden Resolution in July 1861, which stated that the US government had no intention of "overthrowing or interfering with the rights or established institutions of those States" who practiced enslavement.² Northern public opinion strongly supported this resolution,

¹ William E. Gienapp, *The Civil War and Reconstruction: A Documentary Collection* (New York, NY: Norton, 2001), 62.

² *Ibid.*, 117.

and only two members of Congress voted against it.³ However, the legislation's goal was to ensure that border slave states would continue to support the Union and not join the Confederacy.⁴ Thus, it is essential to remember that the issue of slavery in the Union was still very much tied to military strategy and would evolve accordingly. Many Republican politicians, including Lincoln, opposed slavery on moral grounds, but that moral opposition did not usurp the urgency of saving the Union.⁵ From these politicians' perspective, emancipating enslaved people or abolishing slavery still proved too great a threat to potential reunification in 1861. As Lincoln writes in an 1862 letter addressed to Horace Greeley, publisher for the *New York Tribune*, who had been advocating for the president to adopt emancipation as a war aim, "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."⁶ Though Lincoln had already drafted the Emancipation Proclamation, this quote illustrates how tied the question of slavery was to the preservation of the Union.⁷ Any actions against slavery, whether preservative or abolitionary, had to be politically and militarily feasible.

In September 1862, Lincoln issued a preliminary Emancipation Proclamation.⁸ The proclamation established an ultimatum—if the Confederacy did not surrender and rejoin the Union, then Lincoln would emancipate all enslaved people in the Confederacy on January 1, 1863.⁹ Lincoln issued this legislation, as the 1863 proclamation states, "as a fit and necessary war measure for suppressing [the] rebellion."¹⁰ This wording elucidates that the initial purpose of emancipation was not a moral objective but a military one. It only freed the enslaved people in

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ HIST 216 Lecture, October 5, 2022.

⁶ Gienapp, *The Civil*, 126.

⁷ Ibid., 125.

⁸ HIST 216 Lecture, October 28, 2022.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Gienapp, *The Civil*, 165.

the Confederacy, thus maintaining the loyalty of border slave states.¹¹ Illustratively, the proclamation declared that freed enslaved people could enlist in the US army, increasing the Union's manpower by almost 200,000 people.¹² It also facilitated stealing the Confederacy's labour capital—a process that had already begun prior to the proclamation—thus weakening the South's primary method of war production.¹³ Moreover, the proclamation made emancipation a condition for the restoration of the Union.¹⁴ Following the preliminary proclamation, the political magazine *Harper's Weekly* sought to unearth the Northern public's response. According to an editorial from October 1862, "Even at the present time a mortal antipathy for the negro is entertained by a large class of persons at the North [. . .] At the same time, the war has produced a remarkable change in the opinions of educated and liberal men at the North." This quote illustrates a noticeable shift in public opinion toward support of emancipation among the upper classes. However, this change in public opinion did not necessarily alter the widespread view that Black people were inferior. Demonstratively, the *Harper's Weekly* editorial suggests that one of the most prominent groups whose opinions changed on the subject of emancipation were Union generals. According to the same editorial, "nine-tenths of the generals in the field—who, a year ago, really believed that slavery was the true station for the negro—have lately freely expressed what used to be called 'abolition views.'"¹⁵ This observation denotes that some of the most notable shifts in opinion toward emancipation were occurring amongst those who could understand and observe the strategic value of emancipation firsthand. Evidently, in 1863, military strategy still usurped moral justice.

¹¹ HIST 216 Lecture, October 28, 2022.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Gienapp, *The Civil*, 127.

As a war measure, the Emancipation Proclamation overstepped the boundaries of the executive's peacetime power and would no longer have been legal at the close of the conflict.¹⁶ As Lincoln writes in an 1863 letter, "[N]egroes, like other people, act upon motives. Why should they do any thing for us, if we will do nothing for them? If they stake their lives for us, they must be prompted by the strongest motive—even the promise of freedom. And the promise being made, must be kept."¹⁷ Lincoln understood that to secure the aid of Black soldiers, it was wise to guarantee their freedom remained permanent. Consequently, by 1864, the Republican Party adopted a more forthrightly abolitionist stance. In their party platform for the 1864 election, they promised an amendment to the Constitution that would abolish slavery.¹⁸ The fact that the party maintained this promised policy to get reelected shows their confidence in the idea of abolition by 1864 and that they believed the American people were ready to accept it. By early 1865, just before the war's end, Lincoln and other Northern politicians had completely transitioned from viewing emancipation and abolition as a war measure to one of moral success. According to a *New-York Tribune* article from 1865, Lincoln told a group of congratulators in February 1865 after Congress approved the proposed Thirteenth Amendment that "[h]e could not but congratulate all present, himself, the country and the whole world upon this great moral victory."¹⁹ Thus, at the war's end, congruent with Congress' approval to abolish slavery, the president classified abolition not as a military victory but as a "moral victory" for all Americans, Black or white.

Many Northern soldiers and working-class members also changed their opinions on slavery and emancipation throughout the war. In the early years of the war, the working class's opinion on slavery was still primarily one of antipathy. As *Harper's Weekly* says in an 1862

¹⁶ HIST 216 Lecture, October 28, 2022.

¹⁷ Gienapp, *The Civil*, 177.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 263.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 279.

editorial, while the upper classes may have begun to change their opinions, "[h]ow long it will take for these liberal views to permeate society, and stamp themselves on the mind of the working-class, remains to be seen."²⁰ According to *Harper's Weekly*, widespread positive views on emancipation had not ostensibly reached wage earners. Union soldiers, experiencing the conflict firsthand and thus better equipped to recognize the strategic value of emancipation, warmed to the idea of emancipation sooner than many Northern non-combatants. One example of this development is the changing views of a Union soldier named Chauncey Welton. In 1863, Welton was still a firm supporter of the Democratic Party—the party largely opposed to emancipation. Welton wrote to his father in 1863 to say that men were deserting the army because of the proclamation: "[I]t is because they enlisted to fight for our country the constitution and the union as it was [. . .] insted of that they are kept here to sacrificse their lives for the liberty of a miserable black race of beings."²¹ Not only does this quote illustrate Welton's racism and opposition to emancipation, but that many Union soldiers agreed with him so much that they deserted. Indeed, in 1863, Welton considered the Emancipation Proclamation "both illegal and unconstitutional."²² By 1864, however, having witnessed the military benefits of emancipation, Welton changed his tune. Writing to his father in 1864 and speaking in support of Lincoln and his accomplishments, Welton writes, "[I]n one instance an emancipation proclimation was ishued which of course in or under other circumstances would have been inconsistent, but it was intended to weaken the rebellion and I can asszure you it was a great blow to them."²³ In this letter, Welton acknowledges the benefits of emancipation and demonstrates his newfound support for the proclamation. By 1865, nearing the war's end, his transformation from a slavery supporter to an emancipator was complete. After so much conflict,

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 127.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 243.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*, 245.

he was just glad the country may be "free from that blighting curs[e] Slavery the cause of four years Bloody warfare."²⁴

It is true that Welton's story represents only one person's perspective, and using his letters as a frame of reference for examining soldiers' changing opinions on emancipation is inherently limiting. However, in examining other sources, his perspective appears consistent with popular Union Army sentiment. For instance, an account from officer J.N. Jones details how all the soldiers in his regiment, regardless of whether they had previously identified themselves as Republicans or Democrats, voted for Lincoln in the 1864 election: "Company F voted solidly for Lincoln, of free choice and without undue influence."²⁵ Notably, one soldier had told him, "I have always been a Democrat, and never voted anything but the Democratic ticket in my life."²⁶ Lincoln had thus won over the vast majority of Union soldiers to the idea of abolition. The soldiers had seen the strategic benefits of emancipation and were now voting for a Republican platform that promised an abolitionary Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution. According to the 1864 election results, the working class also shared this support, as the Republicans won a landslide victory.²⁷ The election represented a popular mandate by the people of the Union to abolish slavery in the country and thus demonstrated the monumental change in popular opinion regarding slavery throughout the war.

Despite these changes in Northern people's opinions on slavery, it is wrong to consider this a complete break from past prejudices. Support for emancipation and abolition was far from universal. A faction of the Democratic Party, known as Copperheads, were against emancipation and favoured an immediate peace with the Confederacy without abolition as a condition for

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid., 276.

²⁶ Ibid., 275.

²⁷ HIST 216 Lecture, November 9, 2022.

reunification.²⁸ For instance, in an 1864 editorial from the *Illinois State Register*, an organ for the Democratic Party, the *Register* writes, “We know, for we have Lincoln’s official assurance, that we can have no honorable peace while he reigns, and the work before us, therefore, is to replace him by a man who will place the constitution and the Union before abolition and anarchy, and make the rights and liberties of the white race paramount to the freedom of the negro.”²⁹ This quote demonstrates the position of many among the Democratic Party. They placed the “rights and liberties of the white race” above those of Black people, considering it more important to end the devastating conflict than to free Black people from enslavement. This position is understandable when noting that most Copperhead Democrats were pro-slavery, and many came from border states that still practiced slavery.³⁰ When the Republican Party tried to pass the Thirteenth Amendment in Congress, most Democrats voted against it.³¹

Democratic politicians were not the only ones discriminating against Black people. Though Republicans promised emancipation and abolition, they gave lower pay to Black soldiers and did not provide them pensions like white troops.³² Black soldiers could face court martial or execution if they refused to fight because of this pay gap.³³ This form of discrimination extended beyond just soldiers because lack of pay affected those soldiers’ families as well.³⁴ As a Black soldier writes in an 1864 letter to the *Weekly Anglo-African*, “To accept our pay in this way would degrade us, and mark us as inferior soldiers, and would be a complete annihilation of every vestige of our manhood.”³⁵ Even as soldiers fighting for the Union, Black people were forced to accept a position of inferiority under strict penalties for insubordination.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Gienapp, *The Civil*, 270.

³⁰ HIST 216 Lecture, November 9, 2022.

³¹ HIST 216 Lecture, November 16, 2022.

³² HIST 216 Lecture, October 28, 2022.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Gienapp, *The Civil*, 228.

Persistent racism and pro-slavery sentiment were not exclusive to politicians. An account from Union soldier John A. Porter details how his comrades abused fugitive enslaved people simply because of their race: “[T]o my great horror, [they] proceeded to drag the negroes through the blazing fire. I could hardly reconcile their cruelty to them to the great kindness they had shown us.”³⁶ This account shows how racism was still ingrained within members of the Union Army. This same discriminatory attitude remained present in broader Union society. For instance, many foreign-born white working-class citizens disliked the government conscripting them in a war fought for the Black race. In an 1863 speech in Poughkeepsie, New York, Black leader J.W.C Pennington says regarding foreign-born people’s opposition to the war, “Dishonest politicians aim to make these men believe that the war has been undertaken to abolish slavery; and so far as they believe so, their feelings are against colored people.”³⁷ These examples show how many individuals and groups in Northern society still opposed emancipation out of prejudice toward Black folk.

Most importantly, systemic discrimination does not disappear in half a decade, even under the exceptional circumstances of war. While the Civil War undoubtedly vilified slavery in the eyes of many Northerners, they still grew up under the widespread view that Black people were somehow inferior. Historical hindsight brings post-war optimism about the changing opinions of Northerners into question. For instance, in an 1864 editorial reporting on the change in Northern public opinion on slavery, the *New York Times* writes, "The change of opinion on this subject is a remarkable illustration of the practicable aptitude of the American mind."³⁸ Statements such as this age poorly in a contemporary world where the legacy of slavery lives on nearly two hundred years later in the form of systemic anti-Black racism in both the North and

³⁶ Ibid., 242.

³⁷ Ibid., 186.

³⁸ Ibid., 262.

South. The *Times* goes on to say, "With hardly any effort, theories and prejudices, that had apparently rooted themselves in it so deeply as to become a part of [the American mind] are discarded, and new ideas, in keeping with a new condition of affairs, are conceived, and conformed to, almost by universal consent."³⁹ This statement is hyperbolic and false. Change in Northern opinion did not occur "[w]ith hardly any effort," because it took a civil war to change people's minds. The change was not "universal," because plenty of Northerners still saw Black people as inferior or opposed abolition altogether. Furthermore, the federal government did not secure civil rights for Black Americans until the 1960s. Even in 2022, Black Americans are disproportionately subjected to police brutality, racial profiling in the workplace, hate crimes and racial microaggressions. Slavery left in its wake intergenerational anti-Black racism, passed down from parents to their children, keeping Black discrimination alive into the twenty-first century. If the change in white Americans' opinions was as complete and universal in the North as the *Times* suggested, systemic discrimination should not be as significant of an ongoing issue in the Northern US states today. The continued existence of systemic anti-Black racism and the continued presence of racist anti-abolitionary Northerners during the war demonstrate the limits of the Civil War's capacity to change Northern people's opinions on slavery. Though the change in opinion was enough to abolish slavery in the US, it was far from an all-encompassing victory for Black Americans.

The Civil War helped shift many Northern people's opinions on slavery from apathy, support or distaste to abolition at all levels of society. Nevertheless, this change in Northern opinion did not represent a complete break from the prejudices of the past, as many white people continued to hold racist views toward Black Americans. Racism remains a persistent issue as a

³⁹ Ibid.

legacy of slavery today. The Civil War, while abolishing slavery, could not abolish the prejudice that slavery had ingrained within the psyche of white American people for generations.

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