Emancipation Proclamation

Creator: Abraham Lincoln
Date: January 1, 1863
Source type: Government Document (Edited)

Introduction: On January 1, 1863, President Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, which freed (emancipated) all enslaved people in the eleven Confederate states that were at war with the United States.

...I, Abraham Lincoln, President of the United States, by virtue of the power in me vested as Commander-in-Chief, of the Army and Navy of the United States in time of actual armed rebellion against the authority and government of the United States, and as a fit and necessary war measure for suppressing said rebellion, do....order and declare that all persons held as slaves within said designated States, and parts of States, are, and henceforward shall be free.

And I further declare and make known, that such [freed] persons of suitable condition, will be received into the armed service of the United States to garrison forts, positions, stations, and other places, and to man vessels of all sorts in said service.

And upon this act, sincerely believed to be an act of justice, warranted by the Constitution, upon military necessity, I invoke the considerate judgment of mankind, and the gracious favor of Almighty God.
Introduction: In this letter to superiors in the Union army, General Butler describes the military value of fugitive slaves in the Civil War. Butler wanted permission from the Lincoln administration to free those slaves who escaped into Union camps and offered their labor.

The Confederate inhabitants of Virginia are using their negroes in the batteries, and are preparing to send the women and children south. The escapees from the batteries are very numerous, and a group of escaped slaves came into my camp this morning. I have therefore determined to employ the able-bodied persons in the party.

I am informed that twelve of these negroes escaped from the construction of the batteries on Sewall's point, which this morning fired upon my troops as they passed by out of range. In the enemy's hands these negroes, when able-bodied, are of great importance to the enemy's attacks on us. Without them the batteries could not have been built for many weeks. As a military question it would seem to be a measure of necessity to deprive their masters of their services. How can this be done?
A Meeting With President Lincoln

Creator: Frederick Douglass
Date: 1881
Source type: Autobiography (Adapted)

Introduction: In mid-1863, after President Lincoln had issued the Emancipation Proclamation, he invited abolitionist leader Frederick Douglass to the White House to speak with him. Douglass wrote about the meeting in 1881 in his autobiography The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass.

President Lincoln did me the honor to invite me to the Executive Mansion for a conference on the situation. I went most gladly. The main subject on which he wished to confer with me was how to induce the slaves in the rebel states to come within the Federal lines. Mr. Lincoln was alarmed by the increasing opposition to the war by people in the North, and by the mad cry against it because it was becoming a war about abolition. He was apprehensive that a peace might be forced upon him that would leave all who had not come within our lines still in slavery.

I was even more impressed by this benevolent consideration because he had said before, in answer to the peace clamor, that his object was to save the Union, with or without slavery. What he said on this day showed a deeper moral conviction against slavery than I had ever seen before in anything spoken or written by him. I listened with the deepest interest and profoundest satisfaction. At his suggestion, I agreed to organize a band of scouts, composed of colored men, to go into the rebel States, beyond the lines of our armies, to carry the news of emancipation and urge the slaves to come within our boundaries.

I refer to this conversation because I think it is conclusive evidence that the proclamation, so far as Mr. Lincoln was concerned, was not effected merely as a “necessity.”
The question of Slavery is the all absorbing topic of the day. The people of the whole nation agree that this question ought to be settled, and yet it is not settled.

Look at the magnitude of this subject! About one sixth of the whole population of the United States are slaves! The owners of these slaves consider them property. The slaveholder does not like to be considered a mean fellow, for holding that species of property, and hence he has to struggle within himself and sets about arguing himself into the belief that Slavery is right.

But to us in the North, it appears natural to think that slaves are human beings; men, not property; that some of the things, at least, stated about men in the Declaration of Independence apply to them as well as to us. We think Slavery a great moral wrong, and while we do not claim the right to touch it where it exists, we wish to treat it as a wrong in the Territories. In short, we think Slavery a great moral, social and political evil.