

The Emancipation Proclamation

by Lewis E. Lehrman

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President Abraham Lincoln's hand was shaking. New Year's Day festivities on January 1, 1863 began at 11 A.M. The hundreds of hands Lincoln shook at the White House left the nation's chief executive with a tremor he could not afford.

“At eleven o'clock all officers of the army in the city assembled at the War Department, and...proceeded to the White House, where they were severally introduced to the President,” noted journalist Benjamin Perley Poore. “The officers of the navy assembled at the Navy department at the same time, and, headed by Secretary [Gideon] Welles and Admiral [Andrew] Foote, also proceeded to the President's. The display of general officers in brilliant uniforms was an imposing sight, and attracted large crowds. The foreign Ministers, in accordance with the usual custom, also called on the President, and at twelve o'clock the doors were opened to the public, who marched through the hall and shook hands with Mr. Lincoln, to the music of the Marine band, for two or three hours.”

“The New Year opens with a bright and brilliant day,” admitted Navy Secretary Welles, who introduced the parade of naval officials to President Lincoln. But it was also a sad day for Welles whose three-year-old son had recently died. Indeed, it was a sad day for many Americans. Only a few weeks before, the Army of the Potomac had suffered a bloody defeat at Fredericksburg.

President Lincoln was dealing with the aftermath of that debacle. That morning, he had already had met with General Ambrose Burnside, the embattled commander of the Army of the

Potomac whose own subordinates were conspiring to undermine him. The president had also tried to sign the Emancipation Proclamation that morning but it contained an error and had to be redrafted. Around the North, blacks and whites were anxiously awaiting a major step toward freedom for America's slaves. Black abolitionist Frederick Douglass expected a "turning point in the conflict between freedom and slavery" and a "death blow... to the slaveholding rebellion."

About noon, President Lincoln took time out from shaking hands to sign the corrected Emancipation Proclamation. Frederick Seward, assistant secretary of state, remembered coming from the nearby State Department to the White House: "We, threading our way through the throng in the vicinity of the White House, went upstairs to the President's room, where Mr. Lincoln speedily joined us. The broad sheet was spread open before him on the Cabinet table. Mr. Lincoln dipped his pen in the ink, and then, holding it a moment above the sheet, seemed to hesitate."

"Looking around, he said: 'I never in my life felt more certain that I was doing right, than I do in signing this paper. But I have been receiving calls and shaking hands since nine o'clock this morning, till my arm is stiff and numb. Now this signature is one that will be closely examined, and if they find my hand trembled they will say "he had some compunctions." But anyway, it is going to be done.'"

After January 1, 1863, there was no retreat on emancipation. In late July 1863, President Lincoln wrote to General Stephen A. Hurlbut, the commander of Union forces in Arkansas: "The emancipation proclamation applies to Arkansas. I think it is valid in law, and will be so held by the courts. I think I shall not retract or repudiate it. Those who shall have tasted actual freedom I believe can never be slaves, or quasi slaves again."

The president not only instructed his generals; he responded to his northern critics of

emancipation with great confidence and directness: “You say you will not fight to free negroes. Some of them seem willing to fight for you; but, no matter. Fight you, then, exclusively to save the Union. I issued the proclamation on purpose to aid you in saving the Union. Whenever you shall have conquered all resistance to the Union, if I shall urge you to continue fighting, it will be an apt time, then, for you to declare you will not fight to free negroes.”

By the summer of 1863, black Americans were fighting to preserve the Union -- so President Lincoln added: “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.”

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