

# Who Freed The Slaves?

James M. McPherson

IF WE WERE TO GO OUT on the streets of almost any town in America and ask the question posed by the title of this article, probably nine out of ten respondents would unhesitatingly answer, "Abraham Lincoln." Most of them would cite the Emancipation Proclamation as the key document. Some of the more reflective and better informed respondents would add the Thirteenth Amendment and point to Lincoln's important role in its adoption. And a few might qualify their answer by noting that without military victory the Emancipation Proclamation would never have been adopted, or at least would not have applied to the states where most of the slaves were held. But, of course, Lincoln was commander-in-chief of Union armies, so the credit for their victories would belong mainly to him. The answer would still be the same: Lincoln freed the slaves.

In recent years, though, this answer has been challenged as another example of elitist history, of focusing only on the actions of great white males and ignoring the actions of the overwhelming majority of the people, who also make history. If we were to ask our question of professional historians, we would receive a reply quite different from that described above. For one thing, it would not be simple or clear cut. Many of them would answer along the lines of "On the one hand...but on the other." They would speak of ambivalence, ambiguity, nuances, paradox, irony. They would point to Lincoln's gradualism, his slow and apparently reluctant decision for emancipation, his revocation of emancipation orders by Generals John C. Frémont and David Hunter, his exemption of border states and parts of the Confederacy from the Emancipation Proclamation, his statements seemingly endorsing white supremacy. They would say that the whole issue is more complex than it appears—in other words, many historians, as is their wont, would not give a straight answer to the question.

But of those who did, a growing number would reply, as did an historian speaking to the Civil War Institute at Gettysburg two years ago: "THE SLAVES FREED THEMSELVES." They saw the Civil War as a potential war for abolition well before Lincoln did. By voting with their feet for freedom—by escaping from their masters to Union mil-

The traditional answer to the question "Who freed the slaves?" is the right answer. By pronouncing slavery a moral evil that must come to an end, by winning the Presidency in 1860, by refusing to compromise on the issue of slavery's expansion, by knitting together a Unionist coalition, by prosecuting the Civil War to unconditional victory as Commander-in-Chief of an army of liberation, Abraham Lincoln freed the slaves.

itary camps in the South they forced the issue of emancipation on the Lincoln administration. By creating a situation in which northern officials would either have to return them to slavery or acknowledge their freedom, these "contrabands," as they came to be called, "acted resolutely to place their freedom—and that of their posterity—on the wartime agenda." Union officers, then Congress, and finally Lincoln decided to confiscate this human property belonging to the enemy and put it to work for the Union in the form of servants, teamsters, laborers, and eventually soldiers in northern armies. Weighed in the scale of the Civil War, these 190,000 black soldiers and sailors (and probably a larger number of black army laborers) tipped the balance in favor of Union victory. Even deep in the Confederate interior remote from the fighting fronts, with the departure of masters and overseers to the army, "leaving women and old men in charge, the balance of power gradually shifted in favor of slaves, undermining slavery on farms and plantations far from the line of battle."

The foremost exponent of the black self-emancipation theme is the historian and theologian Vincent Harding whose book *There is a River: The Black Struggle for Freedom in America*, published in 1981, has become almost a Bible for the argument. "While Lincoln continued to hesitate about the legal, constitutional, moral, and military aspects of the matter," Harding writes, "the relentless movement of the self-liberated fugitives into the Union lines" soon "approached and surpassed every level of force previously known.... Making themselves an unavoidable military and political issue...this overwhelming human movement...of self-freed men and women...took their freedom into their own hands." The Emancipation Proclamation, when it finally and belatedly came, merely "confirmed and gave ambiguous legal standing to the freedom which black people had already claimed through their own surging, living proclamations."

During the past decade this self-emancipation theme has become so pervasive among social historians that it has virtually achieved the status of the orthodox interpretation. The largest scholarly enterprise on the history of emancipation and the transition from a slave to a free society dur-

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ing the Civil War era, the Freedmen and Southern Society Project at the University of Maryland, has stamped its imprimatur on this interpretation. The slaves, write the editors of this project, were "the prime movers in securing their own liberty." The Columbia University historian Barbara J. Fields gave wide publicity to this thesis. On camera in the PBS television documentary "The Civil War" and in an essay in the lavishly illustrated volume accompanying the series, she insisted that "freedom did not come to the slaves from words on paper, either the words of Congress or those of the President, but from the initiative of the slaves" themselves. "It was they who taught the nation that it must place the abolition of slavery at the head of its agenda.... The slaves themselves had to make their freedom real."

Two important corollaries of the self-emancipation thesis are the arguments, first, that Lincoln hindered more than he helped the cause, and second, that the image of him as the great Emancipator is a myth created by whites to deprive blacks of credit for achieving their own freedom and making their own history. This "reluctant ally of black freedom," Harding remarks, "played an actively conservative role in a situation which...needed to be pushed toward its most profound revolutionary implications." Lincoln repeatedly "placed the preservation of the white Union above the death of black slavery"; even as late as August 1852, when he wrote his famous letter to Horace Greeley stating that "if I could save the Union without freeing any slave, I would do it," he was, Harding writes, "still trapped in his own obsession with saving the white Union at all costs, even the cost of continued black slavery." By exempting one-third of the South from the Emancipation Proclamation, Barbara Fields observes, "Lincoln was more determined to retain the goodwill of the slave owners than to secure the liberty of the slaves." Despite Lincoln, though, "no human being alive could have held back the tide that swept toward freedom" by 1863. Nevertheless, Harding laments, "while the concrete historical realities of the time testified to the costly, daring, courageous activities of hundreds of thousands of black people breaking loose from slavery and setting themselves free, the myth gave the credit for this freedom to a white republican president." By this myth, "the independent, radical action of the black movement toward freedom...was diminished, and the coerced, ambiguous role of a white deliverer...gained preeminence." University of Pennsylvania historian Robert Engs goes even farther; he thinks the "fiction" that "'Massa Lincoln' freed the slaves" was a sort of tacit conspiracy among whites to convince blacks that "white America, personified by Abraham Lincoln, had *given* them their freedom [rather] than allow them to realize the empowerment that their taking of it implied. The poor, uneducated freedman fell for that masterful propaganda stroke. But so have most of the rest of us, black and white, for over a century!"

How valid are these statements? First, we must recognize the considerable degree of truth in the main thesis. By

coming into Union lines, by withdrawing their labor from Confederate owners, by working for the Union army and fighting as soldiers in it, slaves did play an active part in achieving their own freedom and, for that matter, in preserving the Union. Like workers, immigrants, women, and other so-called "non-elites," the slaves were neither passive victims nor pawns of powerful white males who loom so large in our traditional image of American history. They, too, played a part in determining their own destiny; they, too, made a history that historians have finally discovered. That is all to the good. But by challenging the "myth" that Lincoln freed the slaves, proponents of the self-emancipation thesis are in danger of creating another myth—that he had little to do with the destruction of slavery. It may turn out, upon close examination, that the traditional answer to the question "Who Freed the Slaves?" is closer to being the right answer than is the new and currently more fashionable answer.

First, one must ask what was the *siné qua non* of emancipation in the 1860s—the essential condition, the absolute prerequisite, the one thing without which it would not have happened. The clear answer is: the war. Without the Civil War there would have been no confiscation act, no Emancipation Proclamation, no Thirteenth Amendment (not to mention the Fourteenth and Fifteenth), certainly no self-emancipation, and almost certainly no end of slavery for several more decades at least. Slavery had existed in North America for more than two centuries before 1861, but except for a tiny fraction of slaves who fought in the Revolution, or escaped, or bought their freedom, there had been no self-emancipation during that time. Every slave insurrection or insurrection conspiracy failed in the end. On the eve of the Civil War, plantation agriculture was more profitable, slavery more entrenched, slave owners more prosperous, and the "slave power" more dominant within the South if not in the nation at large than it had ever been. Without the war, the door to freedom would have remained closed for an indeterminate length of time.

What brought war and opened that door? The answer, of course, is complex as well as controversial. A short and simple summary is that secession and the refusal of the United States government to recognize the legitimacy of secession brought on the war. In both of these matters Abraham Lincoln moves to center stage. Seven states seceded and formed the Confederacy because he won election to the presidency on an antislavery platform; four more seceded after shooting broke out when he refused to evacuate Fort Sumter; the shooting escalated to full-scale war because he called out troops to suppress rebellion. The common denominator in all the steps that opened the door to freedom was the decision making of Abraham Lincoln acting as antislavery political leader, president-elect, president, and commander-in-chief.

The statement quoted above, that Lincoln "placed the preservation of the white Union above the death of black

slavery," while true in a narrow sense, is highly misleading when shorn of its context. From 1854, when he returned to politics, until nominated for president in 1860, the dominant, unifying theme of Lincoln's career was opposition to the expansion of slavery as the vital first step toward placing it on the course of ultimate extinction. A student of Lincoln's oratory has estimated that he gave 175 political speeches during those six years. The "central message" of these speeches showed Lincoln to be a "one-issue" man—the issue being slavery. Repeatedly, Lincoln denounced slavery as a "monstrous injustice," "an unqualified evil to the negro, to the white man, to the soil, and to the State." He attacked his main political rival, Stephen A. Douglas, for his "declared indifference" to the moral wrong of slavery. Douglas "looks to no end of the institution of slavery," said Lincoln. "That is the real issue. That is the issue that will continue in this country when these poor tongues of Judge Douglas and myself shall be silent. It is the eternal struggle between these two principles—right and wrong—throughout the world.... One is the common right of humanity and the other the divine right of kings.... No matter in what shape it comes, whether from the mouth of a king who seeks to bestride the people of his own nation and live by the fruit of their labor, or from one race of men as an apology for enslaving another race, it is the same tyrannical principle." The principles of the Declaration of Independence and the principle of slavery, said Lincoln, "cannot stand together.... Our republican robe is soiled" by slavery. "Let us re-purify it.... Let us re-adopt the Declaration of Independence, and with it, the practices, and policy, which harmonize with it.... If we do this, we shall not only have saved the Union; but we shall have so saved it, as to make, and to keep it, forever worthy of the saving."

Southerners read Lincoln's speeches; they knew by heart his words about the house divided and the ultimate extinction of slavery. Lincoln's election in 1860 was a sign that they had lost control of the national government; if they remained in the Union, they feared that ultimate extinction of their way of life would be their destiny. That is why they seceded. It was not merely Lincoln's election, but his election as a principled opponent of slavery on moral grounds that precipitated secession. Militant abolitionists critical of Lincoln for falling short of their own standard nevertheless recognized this truth.

No longer would the slave power rule the nation, said Frederick Douglass. "Lincoln's election has vitiated their authority, and broken their power." "We have passed the Rubicon," said Wendell Phillips. "For the first time in our history the *slave* has chosen a President of the United States." Without Lincoln's election, southern states would not have seceded in 1861, the war would not have come when and as it did, the door of emancipation would not have been opened as it was. Here, certainly, was an event that qualifies as a *siné qua non*, and it proceeded more from

the ideas and agency of Abraham Lincoln than from any other single cause.

But, we must ask, would not the election of any Republican in 1860 have precipitated secession? Probably not, if the candidate had been Edward Bates, who might conceivably have won the election but had not even an outside chance of winning the nomination. Yes, almost certainly, if William H. Seward had been the nominee. Seward's earlier talk of a "higher law" and an "irrepressible conflict" had given him a more radical reputation than Lincoln. But Seward might not have won the election. More to the point, if he had won, seven states would undoubtedly have seceded. But Seward would have favored compromises and concessions to keep others from going out and perhaps to lure those seven back in. Most important of all, he would have evacuated Fort Sumter and thereby extinguished the spark that threatened to flame into war. As it was, Seward did his best to compel Lincoln into concessions and evacuation. But Lincoln stood firm. When Seward flirted with the notion of supporting the Crittenden Compromise, which would have repudiated the Republican platform by permitting the expansion of slavery, Lincoln stiffened the backbones of Seward and other key Republican leaders. "Entertain no proposition for a compromise in regard to the *extension* of slavery," he wrote to them. "The tug has to come, & better now, than any time hereafter." Crittenden's compromise "would lose everything we gained by the election." The proposal for concessions, Lincoln pointed out, "acknowledges that slavery has equal rights with liberty, and surrenders all we have contended for.... We have just carried an election on principles fairly stated to the people. Now we are told in advance, the government shall be broken up, unless we surrender to those we have beaten.... If we surrender, it is the end of us. They will repeat the experiment upon us *ad libitum*. A year will not pass, till we shall have to take Cuba as a condition upon which they will stay in the Union."

It is worth emphasizing here that the common denominator in these letters from Lincoln to Republican leaders was slavery. To be sure, on the matters of slavery where it already existed and enforcement of the fugitive slave provision of the Constitution, Lincoln was willing to reassure the South. But on the crucial issue of 1860, slavery in the territories, he refused to compromise, and this refusal kept his party in line. Seward, or any other man who might conceivably have been elected president in 1860, would have pursued a different course. This sheds a different light on the assertion that Lincoln "placed the preservation of the white Union above the death of black slavery." The Crittenden Compromise did indeed place preservation of the Union above the death of slavery. So did Seward; so did most white Americans during the secession crisis. But that assertion does not describe Lincoln. He refused to yield the core of his antislavery philosophy to stay the breakup of the Union. As Lincoln expressed it in a private letter to his old friend

Alexander Stephens, "You think slavery is *right* and ought to be extended; while we think it is *wrong* and ought to be restricted. That I suppose is the rub." It was indeed the rub. Even more than in his election to the presidency, Lincoln's refusal to compromise on the expansion of slavery or on Fort Sumter proved decisive. If any other man had been in his position, the course of history—and of emancipation—would have been different. Here again we have without question a *siné qua non*.

It is quite true, of course, that once the war started, Lincoln moved more slowly and reluctantly toward making it a war for emancipation than black leaders, abolitionists, radical Republicans, and the slaves themselves wanted him to move. He did reassure southern whites that he had no intention and no constitutional power to interfere with slavery in the states. In September 1861 and May 1862, he revoked orders by Generals Frémont and Hunter freeing the slaves of Confederates in their military districts. In December 1861 he forced Secretary of War Cameron to delete a paragraph from his annual report recommending the freeing and arming of slaves. And though Lincoln signed the confiscation acts of August 1861 and July 1862 that provided for freeing some slaves owned by Confederates, this legislation did not come from his initiative. The initiative was taken out in the field by slaves who escaped to Union lines and officers like General Benjamin Butler who accepted them as "contraband of war."

All of this appears to support the thesis that slaves emancipated themselves and that Lincoln's image as emancipator is a myth. But let us take a closer look. It seems clear today, as it did to people in 1861, that no matter how many thousands of slaves came into Union lines, the ultimate fate of the millions who did not, as well as the fate of the institution of slavery itself, depended on the outcome of the war. If the North won, slavery would be weakened if not destroyed; if the Confederacy won, slavery would survive and perhaps grow stronger from the postwar territorial expansion of an independent and confident slave power. Thus Lincoln's emphasis on the priority of Union had positive implications for emancipation, while precipitate or premature actions against slavery might jeopardize the cause of Union and therefore boomerang in favor of slavery.

Lincoln's chief concern in 1861 was to maintain a united coalition of War Democrats and border-state Unionists as well as Republicans in support of the war effort. To do this he considered it essential to define the war as being waged solely for Union, which united this coalition, and not a war against slavery, which would fragment it. When General Frémont issued his emancipation edict in Missouri, on August 30, 1861, the political and military efforts to prevent Kentucky, Maryland, and Missouri from seceding and to cultivate Unionists in western Virginia and eastern Tennessee were at a crucial stage, balancing on a knife edge. If he had let Frémont's order stand, explained Lincoln to his old friend Senator Orville Browning of Illinois, it would

have been "popular in some quarters, and would have been more so if it had been a general declaration of emancipation." But this would have lost the war by driving Kentucky into secession. "I think to lose Kentucky is nearly the same as to lose the whole game. Kentucky gone, we can not hold Missouri, nor, as I think, Maryland. These all against us, and the job on our hands is too large for us. We would as well consent to separation at once, including the surrender of this capitol."

There is no reason to doubt the sincerity and sagacity of this statement. Lincoln's greatest skills as a political leader were his sensitivity to public opinion and his sense of timing. He understood that while a majority of Republicans by the spring of 1862 favored a war against slavery, a decided majority of his Union coalition did not. During those spring months he alternately coaxed and prodded border-state Unionists toward recognition of the inevitable escalation of the conflict into a war against slavery and toward acceptance of his plan for compensated emancipation in their states. He warned southern Unionists and northern Democrats that he could not fight this war "with elder-stalk squirts, charged with rose water.... This government cannot much longer play a game in which it stakes all, and its enemies stake nothing. Those enemies must understand that they cannot experiment for ten years trying to destroy the government, and if they fail still come back into the Union unharmed."

Lincoln's meaning, though veiled, was clear; he was about to add the weapon of emancipation to his arsenal. When he penned these warnings, in July 1862, he had made up his mind to issue an emancipation proclamation. Whereas a year earlier, even three months earlier, Lincoln had believed that avoidance of the emancipation issue was necessary to maintain that knife-edge balance in the Union coalition, things had now changed. The war had escalated in scope and fury, mobilizing all the resources of both sides, including the slave labor force of the Confederacy. The imminent prospect of Union victory in the spring had been shredded by Robert E. Lee's successful counteroffensive in the Seven Days. The risks of alienating the border states and northern Democrats were now outweighed by the opportunity to energize the Republican majority and to mobilize part of the slave population for the cause of Union—and freedom. Lincoln was now convinced that emancipation was "a military necessity, absolutely essential to the preservation of the Union." "The slaves," he told his cabinet, were "undeniably an element of strength to those who had their service, and we must decide whether that element should be with us or against us." Lincoln had earlier hesitated to act against slavery in the states because the Constitution protected it there. But most slaves were the property of enemies waging war against the United States, and "the rebels," said Lincoln, "could not at the same time throw off the Constitution and invoke its aid.... Decisive and extensive measures must be adopted.... We [want] the

army to strike more vigorous blows. The Administration must set an example, and strike at the heart of the rebellion"—slavery. Montgomery Blair, speaking for the forces of conservatism in the North and border states, warned of the consequences among these groups of an emancipation proclamation. But Lincoln was done conciliating these elements. He had tried to make the border states see reason; now "we must make the forward movement" without them. "They will acquiesce, if not immediately, soon." As for the northern Democrats, "their clubs would be used against us take what course we might."

In 1864, speaking to a visiting delegation of abolitionists, Lincoln explained why he had moved more slowly against slavery than they had urged. Having taken an oath to preserve and defend the Constitution, which protected slavery, "I did not consider that I had a *right* to touch the 'State' institution of 'Slavery' until all other measures for restoring the Union had failed.... The moment came when I felt that slavery must die that the nation might live!... Many of my strongest supporters urged *Emancipation* before I thought it indispensable, and, I may say, before I thought the country ready for it. It is my conviction that, had the proclamation been issued even six months earlier than it was, public sentiment would not have sustained it."

Lincoln actually could have made a case that the country had not been ready for the Emancipation Proclamation in September 1862, even in January 1863. Democratic gains in the northern congressional elections in the fall of 1862 resulted in part from a voter backlash against the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation. The crisis in morale in the Union armies and swelling Copperhead strength during the winter of 1863 grew in part from a resentful conviction that Lincoln had unconstitutionally transformed the purpose of the war from restoring the Union to freeing the slaves. Without question, this issue bitterly divided the North and threatened fatally to erode support for the war effort—the very consequence Lincoln had feared in 1861 and that Montgomery Blair feared in 1862. Not until after the twin military victories at Gettysburg and Vicksburg did this divisiveness diminish and emancipation gain a clear mandate in the off-year elections of 1863. In his annual message of December 1863, Lincoln acknowledged that his Emancipation Proclamation a year earlier had been "followed by dark and doubtful days." But now, he added, "the crisis which threatened to divide the friends of the Union is past."

Even that statement turned out to be premature and optimistic. In the summer of 1864, northern morale again plummeted and the emancipation issue once more threatened to undermine the war effort. By August, Grant's campaign in Virginia had bogged down in the trenches after enormous casualties, while Sherman seemed similarly stymied. War weariness and defeatism corroded the will of northerners as they contemplated the staggering cost of this conflict in the lives of their young men. Lincoln came

under enormous pressure to open peace negotiations to end the slaughter. Even though Jefferson Davis insisted that Confederate independence was his essential condition for peace, northern democrats managed to convince a great many northern people that only Lincoln's insistence on emancipation blocked peace. A typical Democratic newspaper editorial declared that "tens of thousands of white men must yet bite the dust to allay the negro mania of the President."

Even Republicans like Horace Greeley, who had criticized Lincoln two years earlier for slowness to embrace emancipation, now criticized him for refusing to abandon it as a precondition for negotiations. The Democratic national convention adopted a platform for the 1864 presidential election calling for peace negotiations to restore the Union with slavery. Every political observer, including Lincoln himself, believed in August that the Republicans would lose this election. The *New York Times* editor and Republican national chairman Henry Raymond told Lincoln that "two special causes are assigned [for] this great reaction in public sentiment—the want of military success, and the impression... that we *can* have peace with Union if we would... [but that you are] fighting not for Union but for the abolition of slavery."

The pressure on Lincoln to back down on emancipation caused him to waver temporarily, but not to buckle. Instead, he told weak-kneed Republicans that "no human power can subdue this rebellion without using the Emancipation lever as I have done." Some 130,000 soldiers and sailors were fighting for the Union, Lincoln noted. They would not do so if they thought the North intended to "betray them.... If they stake their lives for us they must be prompted by the strongest motive... the promise of freedom. And the promise being made, must be kept.... There have been men who proposed to me to return to slavery the black warriors" who had fought for the Union. "I should be damned in time & in eternity for so doing. The world shall know that I will keep my faith to friends and enemies, come what will."

When Lincoln said this, he fully expected to lose the presidential election. In effect, he was saying that he would rather be right than president. In many ways this was his finest hour. As matters turned out, of course, he was both right and president. Sherman's capture of Atlanta, Sheridan's victories in the Shenandoah Valley, and military success elsewhere transformed the northern mood from deepest despair in August 1864 to determined confidence by November, and Lincoln was triumphantly reelected. He won without compromising one inch on the emancipation question.

It is instructive to consider two possible alternatives to this outcome. If the Democrats had won, at best the Union would have been restored without a Thirteenth Amendment; at worst the Confederacy would have achieved its independence. In either case the institution of slavery would have survived. That this did not happen was owing more to

the steadfast purpose of Abraham Lincoln than to any other single factor.

The proponents of the self-emancipation thesis, however, would avow that all of this is irrelevant. If it is true, as Barbara Fields maintains, that by the time of the Emancipation Proclamation "no human being alive could have held back the tide that swept toward freedom," that tide must have been even more powerful by the fall of 1864. But I disagree. The tide of freedom could have been swept back. On numerous occasions during the war, when Union forces were compelled to retreat from areas of the Confederacy where their presence had attracted and liberated contrabands, the tide of slavery closed in behind them. Lee's army captured dozens of black people in Pennsylvania in June 1863 and sent them back South into slavery. Hundreds of black Union soldiers captured by Confederate forces were reenslaved. Lincoln himself took note of this phenomenon when he warned that if "the pressure of the war should call off our forces from New Orleans to defend some other point, what is to prevent the masters from reducing the blacks to slavery again; for I am told that whenever the rebels take any black prisoners, free or slave, they immediately auction them off!" The editors of the Freedmen's and Southern Society Project, the most scholarly advocates of the self-emancipation thesis, concede that "Southern armies could recapture black people who had already reached Union lines.... Indeed, any Union retreat could reverse the process of liberation and throw men and women who tasted freedom back into bondage.... Their travail testified to the link between the military success of the Northern armies and the liberty of Southern slaves."

Precisely. That is the crucial point. Slaves did not emancipate themselves; they were liberated by Union armies. Liberation quite literally came from the barrel of a gun. And who was the commander-in-chief that called these armies into being, appointed their generals, and gave them direction and purpose? There, indubitably, is our *siné qua non*.

But let us acknowledge that once the war was carried into slave territory, no matter how it came out, the ensuing "friction and abrasion" (as Lincoln once put it) would enable thousands of slaves to escape to freedom. In that respect, a degree of self-emancipation *did* occur. But even on a large scale, such emancipation was very different from *the abolition of the institution of slavery*. That required Union victory; it required Lincoln's reelection in 1864; it required the Thirteenth Amendment. Lincoln played a vital role, indeed the central role, in all of these achievements. It was also his policies and his skillful political leadership that set in motion the processes by which

the reconstructed or Unionist states of Louisiana, Arkansas, Tennessee, Maryland, and Missouri abolished the institution in those states during the war itself.

Regrettably, Lincoln did not live to see the final ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment. But if he had *never* lived, it seems safe to say that we would not have had a Thirteenth Amendment in 1865. In that sense, the traditional answer to the question "Who freed the slaves?" is the right answer. Lincoln did not accomplish this in the manner sometimes symbolically portrayed, breaking the chains of helpless and passive bondsmen with the stroke of a pen by signing the Emancipation Proclamation. But by pronouncing slavery a moral evil that must come to an end and then winning the Presidency in 1860, provoking the South to secede, refusing to compromise on the issue of slavery's expansion or on Fort Sumter, knitting together a Unionist coalition in the first year of war and committing it to emancipation in the second, refusing to compromise this policy once he had adopted it, and prosecuting the war to unconditional victory as commander-in-chief of an army of liberation, Abraham Lincoln freed the slaves. ■

