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## A Discussion on the Significance of the Emancipation Proclamation

Life before and after the Emancipation Proclamation was quite different in the lives of African American slaves during the time it was put into effect. Before the Emancipation Proclamation was initiated by President Abraham, African Americans were seen as less than humans, considered as property, mistreated, and endured various hardships. The newly freed slaves would continue to experience such things even after the proclamation. Slaves did not have the all the privileges and freedoms that Whites had and that we have today. Contrasting with this, was what life was like for them after the Emancipation Proclamation and in the later years following the Civil War. For once the war was over and the Emancipation Proclamation was established, African Americans could now live independently and lead almost what was normal and productive lives. But even after the Civil War, blacks would continue the long and hard fight for their freedoms and rights. In this essay, I will give a brief overview of the Civil War, what life was like for the slaves before the war, the events that led up to this historical incident, the Emancipation Proclamation and its significance, the life of a slave after the Emancipation Proclamation, and what slavery means to our society today.

The American Civil War, lasting from 1861 to 1865, was fought between what was known as the Union, the North, and the Confederacy, the South. America had fought for its independence from Britain several years before. Now, it was time for African Americans to also fight for their independence and break the yoke of bondage that their captors held them in for so long. The Union, was against slavery and wanted to abolish it, while the South fought to continue it. The Civil War originated on the concept of slavery. The Southern states viewed the abolishment of slavery as a violation of their rights and was unconstitutional. But the Civil War was not solely about slavery. Other differences and disagreements that two sides had, such as politics and the debate on secession, slowly built up the tension that had already existed between them. Because the South feared for their rights and thought those rights were being violated through the government's decision to end slavery, they felt the need to react to protect themselves. After all, if the central government acted against the South's wishes and defied the Constitution, they would soon continue to do so in the future. President Lincoln was elected around that time and before he was even inaugurated several states had left the Union. Beginning in January, 1861, seven slave states left the Union. The states included: South Carolina, which was the first to secede from the Union and form the Confederacy, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, Texas, Louisiana, and Florida. Just months later, Arkansas, Virginia, Tennessee, North Carolina, would also secede from the Union making the total number of states that had left, eleven. War eventually broke out when the two sides could not find a compromise nor solution to their

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problems. The South continued in its rebellion against the Union, which held the central governing body of the nation. Several states had seceded from the Union and set up their own system and government, dividing the country into two. The war officially started on the morning of April 12, 1861, when the South attacked Fort Sumter, a U.S. fort in South Carolina. After rebelling against the Union for so long, the South had now pulled the last straw, and the war had finally begun. The Civil War was just another one of the wars that set the stages in the changes the nation would undergo and ultimately lead up to where we are today.

The life of a slave before the Civil War was a lot different after the war though things did not start to improve immediately. Slaves were forced to work long and hard hours in the heat, were malnourished, beaten, and underwent many more difficulties. Some worked on vast plantations, toiling in the fields, picking cotton and more, while others worked on plantations that were not as big. Some slaves had harsh and brutal masters, while others had masters who treated them as one of the family. But regardless of whichever master the slave had, the slave was still considered a slave, though those with masters that were not so harsh received better treatment than those who did not. Slaves had no rights or say so in American politics nor any other area in the decision making of America or their masters. Slaves were not even considered as people, but as property. The founding fathers and writers of the Constitution considered slaves as three-fifths of a person, thus African Americans were perceived and treated as inferior to the Whites. One reason for why Africans were selected out of every other ethnic group was supposedly for religious reasons. Perceived as pagans and barbarians in their homeland, the Whites believed that enslavement would “save” them. It would also be easy to kidnap and force them into slavery knowing that they had no support system nor anyone who would fight for them. Isolated and left to fend for themselves, several thousand Africans were forced on to slave ships where it would take them to their new home in which they would work as slaves. The idea of slavery seemed like the greatest choice for the growing American economy at that time and was more convenient than having indentured servants. Indentured servants often worked between four to seven years and were paid in the forms of a place to live and other basic necessities.

Indentured servants were also able to gain their freedom after their time of servitude expired. Because slaves could not demand any form of payment like indentured servants could, slavery was chosen as the best option, with Africans being their main target.

The events that led up to the Civil War each occurred slowly but continuously. In *What Caused the Civil War? Reflections on the South and Southern History*, Edward L. Ayers discusses how Americans today depict the Civil War and its causes. He goes on to address questions of how modern Americans view the Civil War. As for the cause of the Civil War, he allows that the short answer is, indeed, slavery. However, he cautions that it required the interaction of many other factors to turn the tension over slavery into a great Civil War. Rather, slavery was “the key catalytic agent in a volatile new mix of democratic politics and accelerated communication, a

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process chemical in its complexity and subtlety” (142). Those two words, “complexity” and “subtlety,” are key terms in Ayers’ understanding both of the Civil War and of all of Southern history, and he repeatedly cautions the reader against settling for “simple explanations for complex problems” (143).<sup>1</sup> Though slavery might have been the central cause of the war, it was not the only cause. While there are various debates about what specifically caused this great event in history, slavery was just one of the many factors that caused the war. Failure of the slave states to find a common ground or compromise with the free states caused the two groups to clash. This divided what was supposedly the United States and before long, the tensions that had built up for so long between the North and the South had finally escalated into a grand blowout between American and itself. This blowout would last four years.

The Emancipation Proclamation was instituted on January 1st, 1863 by President Lincoln. President Lincoln determined by the fall of 1862 to move against slavery. By that time, the political risks of inactivity equaled or exceeded those of appearing rash and desperate and freed the President to act on his antislavery principles. On September 22, 1862, he warned the Confederates that unless they ended their rebellion he would move against slavery on January 1, 1863, and with the onset of the new year he made good his promise, declaring that “all persons held as slaves” in rebel areas “are, and henceforward shall be, free”; he added that “such persons of suitable condition will be received into the armed service of the United States.”<sup>2</sup> This statement implies that President Lincoln used the concept of ending slavery as a way to get the attention of the South and to end their rebellion. Therefore, it also implies that the Civil War was not just about slavery, but subduing the Confederacy who had rebelled against the U.S. and started their own agenda. During that time, in each law that addressed slaves and slavery. Congress moved toward freeing slaves and limiting slavery." Congress also indicated a willingness to emancipate various groups of slaves as war policy.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, those laws gave the President the power and duty to seize and liberate the property, including slaves, of those who were engaged in war against the United States or were disloyal to the United States." President Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation against that legislative backdrop. Given such legislation. President Lincoln may have had the constitutional authority to issue much of the Emancipation Proclamation under his take care authority.<sup>3</sup> During the time of the Emancipation Proclamation, the nation had now been in its third year of engaging the South in the Civil War. The Emancipation in itself was a source and symbol of freedom to the African slaves, though they had a long road to take until they could live a normal life in the land of which they were now free. Though the Emancipation Proclamation freed the slaves in the South, freeing the slaves was not President Lincoln’s original plan and intention in instituting the proclamation. Knowing that he had to retain the loyalty of the slaveholding border states, President Lincoln declared that his paramount intention was to save the Union, not to free the slaves.

In this case, Lincoln’s initial concern was preserving the Union which was now torn in two by the issue of slavery. It was only by settling this issue that the country would be put back

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together again. "...the Proclamation had a powerful symbolic effect. It broadened the base of the war and turned it into a fight for freedom as well as union. It gave the Northern cause the weight of a moral crusade.<sup>5</sup> Thus the Emancipation Proclamation allowed the newly freed slaves to enjoy freedoms they were forbidden from having prior to being set free while it did not provide for them the privilege or rights the white citizens had.

The Reconstruction Era began in 1865, following the Civil War, and lasted until 1877.

The Reconstruction Era marked a turning point in history in the lives of the newly freed slaves. It also was only the beginning in the African American's long road to freedom and independence, for after the Civil War, they were still not yet treated fairly and as equals to the Whites. Clearly a racist image of Reconstruction as a failure, ignoring the era's accomplishments, combined with the Jim Crow laws, the violence that accompanied them, lynching, and convict leasing, all contributed to the humiliation and terror of African Americans...<sup>6</sup> This statement implies that even after the Civil War, African Americans were still mistreated and persecuted. For though they had been freed, they would pay a high price for their freedom to the angry and enraged South who resisted any form of Reconstruction. The postemancipation period had brought freedom and a new way of life in the lives of former slaves, but it also brought with it hardships, persecution, and oppression. But, the purpose of Radical Reconstruction was to give African Americans equality. That goal was not immediately achieved in the years following the Civil War. Radical Republicans sincerely wanted to help the former slaves, but they made two serious mistakes. They assumed that giving southern blacks the vote would enable them to protect themselves politically. Second, Radical Republicans, although willing to give millions of acre of land to railroad companies, were unwilling to give land to the freed slaves so that they could become economically independent.<sup>7</sup> This statement in itself speaks of how blacks were not able to become completely independent though they were free and able to do and go wherever they wished. They would continue the long and hard fight before their hopes and dreams would become a reality. For though they were finally free, African Americans would yet suffer from what the war had left behind. The defeat of the Confederacy brought freedom, but also uncertainty. Without education and jobs, freed people faced continued poverty.<sup>8</sup> Many lost their lives, underwent many difficulties, and mistreated in the process of that fight. Yet, they all stood their ground and fought bravely.. It was individuals such as these that made their greatest mark on history and are heroes to this day. The Reconstruction Era, the aftermath of America's war from within, was the second period of time in which America underwent restructure, with the first being the Revolution. America would continue this process of restructure even after the Reconstruction era had ended. Though the war was over, it had left a messy mark, one which was going to take some time to clean up. Many lives were lost on both sides during the bloody and gruesome war.

Cities and towns laid desolate and in ruins, with bodies strewn everywhere. The North had won

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the war, but paid a high price. Yet the South was now defeated, thus, they finally gave up and surrendered. Lincoln later pardoned the South and the nation was unified once more. The end of the Civil War may have brought closure to the death and devastation of the battlefield, but it opened a Pandora's box of social and economic problems. The magnitude of disorder and suffering was tremendous: abandoned lands, lack of food and clothing, the many thousands of displaced persons, successive crop failures, and the transition from slave to free labor on the part of millions of black people.<sup>9</sup> With the Civil War now over, new social and economical problems had arose for America. One of the greatest periods of time in America's growth and rebuilding, the Reconstruction era helped shape American and its future. But while the Reconstruction era opened a new area of problems in the developing nation, it also brought about new opportunities and a means for African Americans to support themselves and start a new life. It was during this time that the Freedmen's Bureau was established, helping to assist both blacks and whites who were struggling to survive. The bureau fed the hungry, provided medical care, shelter, and more to those who needed it to both poor Blacks and Whites. During the Reconstruction era, the concept of education was also open to African Americans, of which it had been forbidden for slaves before then. In the past, slaves would get into severe trouble if they were caught reading or performing any other educational activity. This could also mean trouble for their masters as well if they were caught educating the slaves. After the Civil War, those laws no longer applied. The fuller freedom Quarles speaks of represents a psychological break from the chains of slavery. As the legal chains of slavery were released via the emancipation proclamation, education became the principal source of release from the psychological chains of slavery.<sup>10</sup> The emancipation had set slaves free physically, but now through education, African Americans were set free mentally. Something that was strictly forbidden and off limits to the former slaves, was freely available to them now. This also enabled them to become more independent because they knew how to support themselves and their families. This, along with the beginning of African American's fight for civil rights were just some of the changes that the post Civil War and Reconstruction era brought about. Though a slow and difficult process, it eventually paved the way for life as we know it now here in America.

Though African Americans are no longer enslaved today, its effects are still present in our society today. The false perception of blacks being inferior and mediocre and the issue with racism is still common, though it may not be as apparent and strong as it was back then. But just as this prejudice divided and almost destroyed an entire nation, it is still destructive and divisive in our society today. Sharon E. Davis speaks about racism and its effects in her article, *The Oneness of Humankind: Healing the Racism Today: The compound problem of race and other issues such as poverty only can be resolved with the acceptance and understanding of our human oneness. Our shared humanity is the glue that holds us and our future in its grasp. We are familiar with how families grow into clans, then tribes, and tribes into kingdoms and then states/nations. The pressing need is to be unified in all essential aspects of human life, yet infinite in our diversity. . . . The deep roots of racism are anchored in the false belief that one*

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race or culture is superior. Further, the principle of the Oneness of Humankind means that not only White people can be racists. Given the same history and circumstances, any group of human beings may behave in similar ways. 11 No one race or ethnic group is superior to another.

However, it is when we begin to believe and live this concept, that we grow farther apart and in opposition to one another. When we refuse to accept people for who they are and only perceive them as different then we miss really miss out on what matters. In fact, refusal can be not only harmful for the other person, but us as well. As racism was divisive back then and almost ruined a nation, it is still divisive and destructive today. One of the main causes of the Civil War was disunity, greed, and just plain selfishness. Perhaps, if the two sides had found a way to work through their problems, the war could have been avoided. It is critical that we perceive others the same way we perceive ourselves. For if things were reversed, how would we feel?

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