

GETTYSBURG COLLEGE

FORTENBAUGH LECTURE

The Robert Fortenbaugh Memorial Lecture is the outgrowth of a series of Civil War Conferences held annually at Gettysburg College from 1957 to 1961. Organized by Professor Fortenbaugh and his colleagues in the Department of History, the conferences attracted some of the outstanding historians of the nation. Papers presented at these conferences appeared in various scholarly publications such as C. Vann Woodward's *The Burden of Southern History* (1960). The proceedings of two conferences were published in their entirety in book form: *Why the North Won the Civil War* (1960), edited by David Donald, and *Politics and the Crisis of 1860*, (1961), edited by Norman A. Graebner.

The Fortenbaugh Lecture is presented each year on November 19, the anniversary of the Gettysburg Address. It was sustained during its first two decades by an endowment contributed by Mr. and Mrs. Clyde B. Gerberich of Mt. Joy, Pennsylvania in honor of Professor Fortenbaugh, Mr. Gerberich's classmate (Gettysburg, 1913) and long-time friend, who taught history at their alma mater from 1923 until his death in 1959. The endowment is now being supplemented by contributions of friends of the College and a matching grant of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

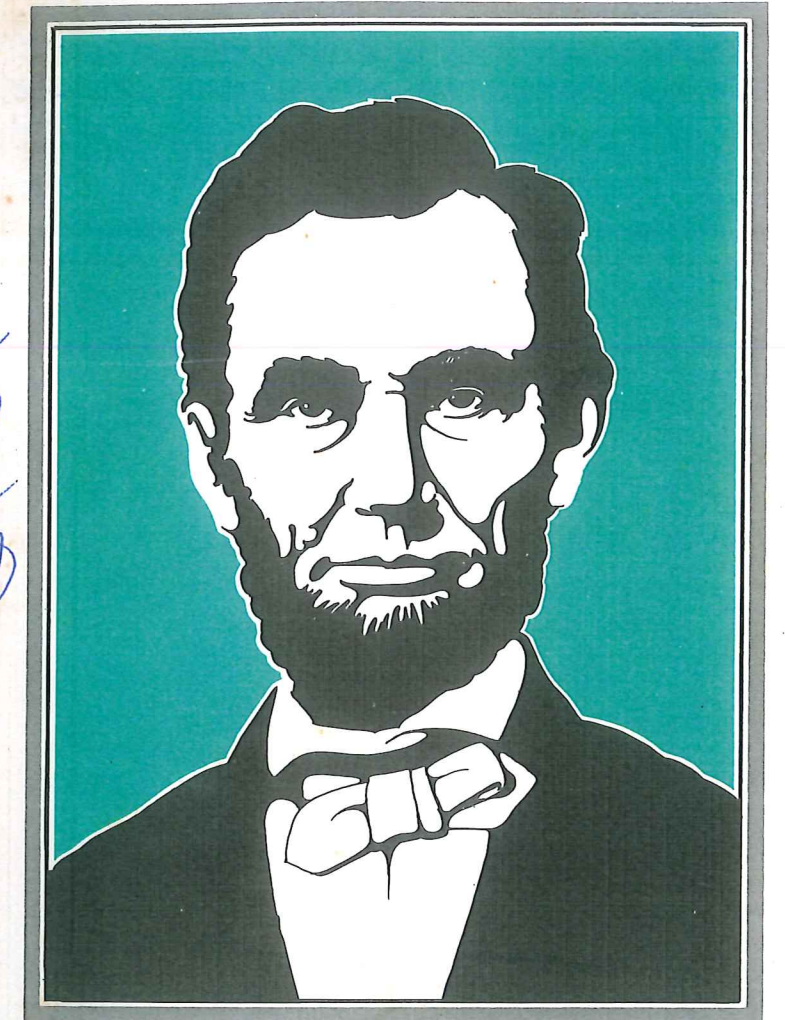
The first Fortenbaugh Lecture was delivered in 1962 by Bruce Catton; the twentieth by C. Vann Woodward in the 150th year of Gettysburg College in 1981. With the twenty-first lecture by Jacques Barzun, in 1982, the College commenced the annual publication of the lectures. The lectures published thus far are:

Jacques Barzun, *Lincoln's Philosophic Vision* (1982)

David Brion Davis, *The Emancipation Moment* (1983)

James M. McPherson, *Lincoln and the Strategy of Unconditional Surrender* (1984)

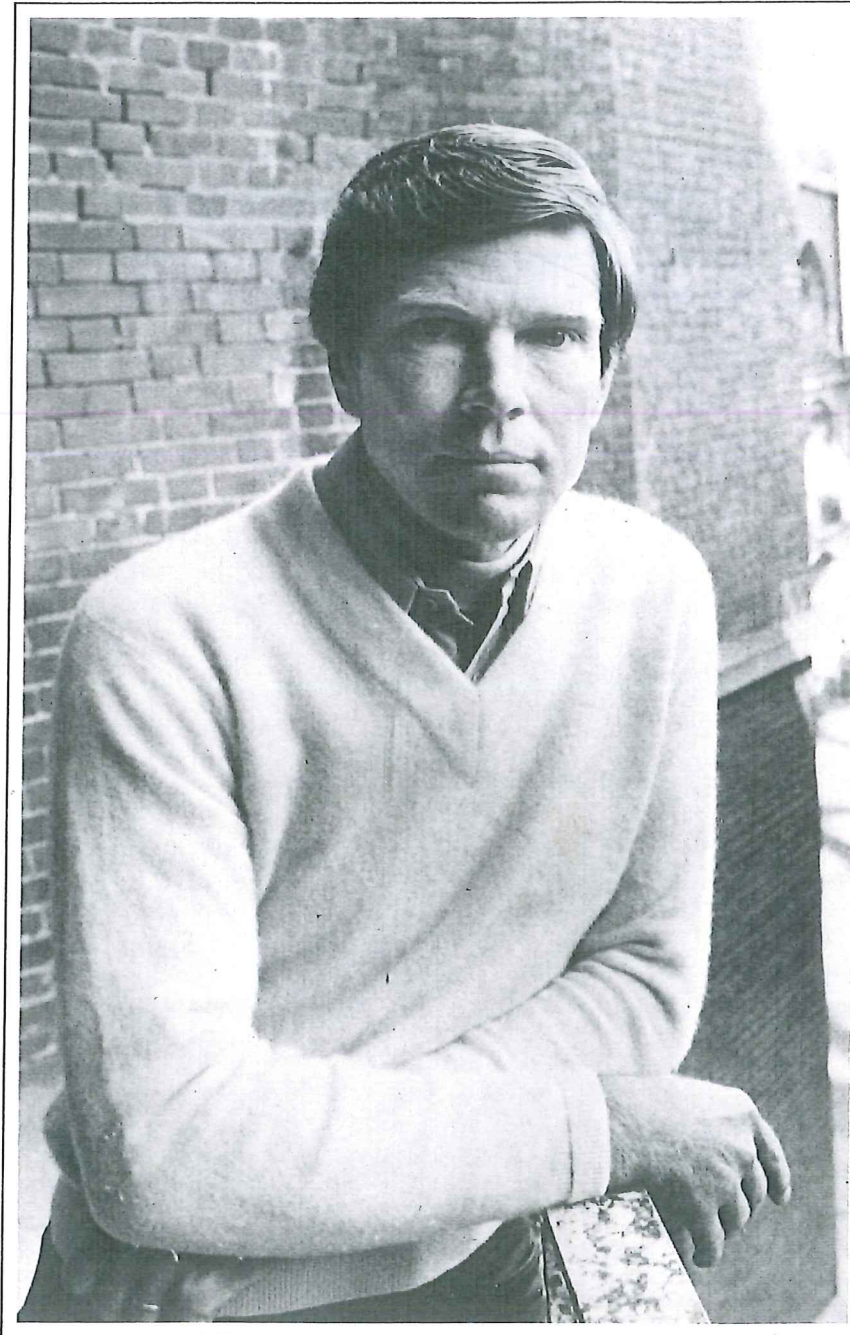
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228
39
47



LINCOLN AND THE STRATEGY OF UNCONDITIONAL SURRENDER

JAMES M. McPHERSON

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JAMES M. McPHERSON

**LINCOLN AND THE STRATEGY
OF UNCONDITIONAL SURRENDER**

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Preface

In this 175th year of Lincoln's birth, it is "fitting and proper" that James M. McPherson selected the Civil War President as the subject of his Fortenbaugh Lecture. His focus is, indeed, clearly fixed on the "War President"—words he capitalizes and italicizes for emphasis. Starting with Clausewitz, McPherson distinguishes between national strategy and military strategy and then proceeds to illuminate what he considers to be "the real strategic contribution of Abraham Lincoln to Union victory."

Recent Lincoln scholarship has devoted little attention to Lincoln as a war leader, perhaps in part because it sees him—but not war on the whole—as admirable. Current writing is, in this sense, a product of the Vietnam War—in contrast to the Lincoln scholarship of the previous generation which was strongly influenced by the American experience in World War II. Not surprisingly, it was this earlier generation that had written much, and ably, about Lincoln's search for strategy and generals, in short about the "War President." And now with World War II and Vietnam both behind us, Professor McPherson, armed with a younger generation's insights and vigor, takes up where the historians of the 1940s and 1950s left off. He is tugging Lincoln studies in both old and new directions. One wishes him godspeed.

Gabor S. Boritt

Thanksgiving Day, 1984
Farm at the Ford
Gettysburg, Pennsylvania

I feel most honored this evening to stand here just one mile from the spot where Abraham Lincoln delivered his Gettysburg Address six score and one years ago. The subject of my lecture is relevant to the occasion that brought Lincoln to Gettysburg—the dedication of a national cemetery for soldiers who died in what turned out to be the biggest battle in America's biggest war. Terrible and tragic was that war. More Americans, soldiers and civilians, died in it than in all the rest of this country's wars combined. But the Civil War also did more to shape the nation than all those wars combined, except the Revolution. The Civil War preserved from destruction the Union created by the Revolution, while transforming that Union into a different kind of nation—giving it a new birth of freedom, as Lincoln said here at Gettysburg, by liberating four million slaves and destroying a social system based on human bondage. An understanding of that war is crucial to a comprehension of American history and to an appreciation of Lincoln's leadership in changing the course of that history.

The most important single circumstance in shaping Lincoln's greatness was the war. He was a *War President*. Indeed, he was the only President in our history whose entire administration was bounded by the parameters of war. The first official document that Lincoln saw as President—at one o'clock in the morning when he returned from the inaugural ball—was a letter from Major Robert Anderson at Fort Sumter stating that unless re-supplied he could hold out only a few more weeks. This news, in effect, struck the first blow of the Civil War, and the fatal shot fired by John Wilkes Booth on April 14, 1865, struck virtually the last blow of the war. During the intervening one thousand, five hundred and three days there was scarcely one in which Lincoln was not preoccupied with the war. Military matters took up more of his time and attention than any other matter, as indicated by the activities chronicled in that fascinating volume, *Lincoln Day by Day*.¹ He spent more time in the War Department telegraph office than anywhere else except the White House itself. During times of crisis, Lincoln frequently stayed at the telegraph office all night reading dispatches from the front, sending dispatches of his own, holding emergency conferences with Secretary of War Stanton, General-in-Chief Halleck, and other officials. He even wrote the first draft of the Emancipation Proclamation in this office while awaiting news from the army.²

Lincoln took seriously his constitutional duty as commander in chief of the army and navy. He borrowed books on military strategy from the Library of Congress and burned the midnight oil reading them. No fewer than eleven

times he left Washington to visit the Army of the Potomac at the fighting front in Virginia or Maryland, spending a total of forty-two days with the army. Some of the most dramatic events in Lincoln's presidency grew out of his direct intervention in strategic and command decisions. In May 1862, along with Secretary of War Stanton and Secretary of the Treasury Chase, he visited Union forces at Hampton Roads in Virginia and personally issued orders that led to the occupation of Norfolk. Later that same month, Lincoln haunted the War Department telegraph room almost around the clock for more than a week and fired off a total of fifty telegrams to half a dozen generals to coordinate an attempt to trap and crush Stonewall Jackson's army in the Shenandoah Valley—an attempt that failed partly because Jackson moved too fast but mainly because Union generals, much to Lincoln's disgust, moved too slowly. A couple of months later, Lincoln made the controversial decision to transfer the Army of the Potomac from the Virginia Peninsula southeast of Richmond to northern Virginia covering Washington. And a couple of months later yet, Lincoln finally removed General George B. McClellan from command of this army because McClellan seemed reluctant to fight. A year later, in September 1863, Lincoln was roused from bed at his summer residence in the soldiers' home for a dramatic midnight conference at the War Department where he decided to send four divisions from the Army of the Potomac to reinforce General William Rosecrans's besieged army in Chattanooga after it had lost the battle of Chickamauga.

Lincoln subsequently put General Ulysses Grant in command at Chattanooga and then in the spring of 1864 brought him to Washington as the new general in chief. Thereafter, with a commander in charge who had Lincoln's full confidence, the President played a less direct role in command decisions than he had done before. Nevertheless, Lincoln continued to help shape crucial strategic plans and to sustain Grant against pressures from all sides during that dark summer of 1864. In August he wired Grant: "I have seen your despatch expressing your unwillingness to break your hold where you are. Neither am I willing. Hold on with a bull-dog grip, and chew & choke, as much as possible."³ When Confederate General Jubal Early drove a small Union army out of Shenandoah Valley in the summer of 1864, crossed the Potomac, and threatened Washington itself before being driven off, Lincoln went personally to Fort Stevens, part of the Washington defenses, to observe the fighting. It was on this occasion that a Union officer standing a few feet from Lincoln was hit by a Confederate bullet and that another officer—none other than Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.—noticing without recognizing out of the corner of his eye this tall civilian standing on the parapet in the line of fire, said urgently: "Get down, you damn fool, before you get shot!" A chastened President got down.⁴

Grant subsequently sent several divisions from the Army of the Potomac with orders to go after Early's army in the Shenandoah Valley "and follow

him to the death." When Lincoln saw these orders he telegraphed Grant: "This, I think, is exactly right." But "it will neither be done nor attempted unless you watch it every day, and hour, and force it."⁵ In response to this telegram Grant came to Washington, conferred with Lincoln, and put his most trusted subordinate Philip Sheridan in command of the Union forces in the Shenandoah Valley where they did indeed follow Early to the death and destroy his army. About the same time, Lincoln approved the plans for Sherman's march through Georgia. It was these three campaigns—Grant's chewing and choking of Lee's army at Petersburg, Sheridan's following of Early to the death in the Shenandoah, and Sherman's march through Georgia and the Carolinas—that finally destroyed the Confederacy and brought about its unconditional surrender.

Commander-in-Chief Lincoln was mainly responsible for this unconditional victory of Union forces. But in the huge body of writing about Lincoln—there are more titles in the English language about Lincoln than about anyone else except Jesus and Shakespeare—only a small number of books and articles focus primarily on Lincoln as a war leader. In September 1984, Gettysburg College hosted a conference on recent scholarship about the sixteenth President. This conference had sessions on three books of psychohistory about Lincoln, two sessions on books about his assassination, two sessions on Lincoln's image in photographs and popular prints, one on his economic ideas, one on Lincoln and civil religion, one on his humor, one on his Indian policy, and one on slavery and emancipation—but no session on Lincoln as a military leader. The recently published *Abraham Lincoln Encyclopedia* by Mark Neely, Jr., an outstanding compendium of information and scholarship, devotes less than 5 percent of its space to military and related matters. I note this not as a criticism of the conference or of the encyclopedia, both of which I consider to be superb achievements. Rather, it is a reflection on the nature and direction of modern Lincoln scholarship.

A generation ago, fine studies by two historians named Williams—T. Harry and Kenneth P.—told us everything we might want to know about Lincoln's search for the right military strategy and for the right generals to carry it out.⁶ A number of other books and articles have also explored Lincoln's relationships with his generals, the wisdom or lack thereof that the President demonstrated in certain strategic decisions, and a great deal more of a similar nature. Many of these are excellent studies. They provide important and fascinating insights on Lincoln as commander in chief. But as a portrait of Lincoln, the strategist of Union victory, they are incomplete. The focus is too narrow; the larger picture is somehow blurred.

Most of these studies are based on too restricted a definition of strategy. On this matter we can consult with profit the writings of the most influential theorist of war, Carl von Clausewitz. One of Clausewitz's famous maxims defines war as the continuation of state policy by other means—that is, war

is an instrument of last resort to achieve a nation's political goals. Using this insight, we can divide our definition of strategy into two parts: First, *national strategy* (or what the British call grand strategy); second, *military strategy* (or what the British call operational strategy). National strategy is the shaping and defining of a nation's political goals in time of war. Military strategy is the use of armed forces to achieve these political goals.⁷ Most studies of Lincoln and his generals focus mainly on this second kind of strategy—that is, military or operational strategy. And that is the problem. For it is impossible to understand military strategy without also comprehending national strategy—the political war aims—for which military strategy is merely the instrument. This is true to some degree in all wars; it was especially true of the American Civil War, which was pre-eminently a *political* war precipitated by a presidential election in the world's most politicized society, fought largely by volunteer soldiers who elected many of their officers and who also helped elect the political leadership that directed the war effort, and in which many of the commanders were appointed for political reasons.

Let us look at this matter of political generals, to illustrate the point that military strategy can be understood only within the larger context of national strategy. Both Abraham Lincoln and Jefferson Davis commissioned generals who had little or no professional training: men like Benjamin Butler, Nathaniel Banks, Carl Schurz, Robert Toombs, Henry Wise, and so on. A good many of these generals proved to be incompetent; some battlefield disasters resulted from their presence in command. Professional army officers bemoaned the prominence of political generals: Henry W. Halleck, for example, commented that "it seems but little better than murder to give important commands to such men as Banks, Butler, McClernand, and Lew Wallace, but it seems impossible to prevent it."⁸

A good many military historians have similarly deplored the political generals. They often cite one anecdote to ridicule the process. To satisfy the large German ethnic constituency in the North, Lincoln felt it necessary to appoint a number of German-American generals. Poring over a list of eligible men one day in 1862, the President came across the name of Alexander Schimmelfennig. "The very man!" said Lincoln. When Secretary of War Stanton protested that better-qualified officers were available, the President insisted on Schimmelfennig. "His name," said Lincoln, "will make up for any difference there may be," and he walked away repeating the name Schimmelfennig with a chuckle.⁹

Historians who note that Schimmelfennig turned out to be a mediocre commander miss the point. Their criticism is grounded in a narrow concept of *military* strategy. But Lincoln made this and similar appointments for reasons of *national* strategy. Each of the political generals represented an important ethnic, regional, or political constituency in the North. The support of these constituencies for the war effort was crucial. Democrats, Irish-

Americans, many German-Americans, and residents of the watersheds of the Ohio and Missouri Rivers had not voted for Lincoln in 1860 and were potential defectors from a war to crush the rebels and coerce the South back into the Union. To mobilize their support for this war, Lincoln had to give them political patronage; a general's commission was one of the highest patronage plums. From the viewpoint of military strategy this may have been inefficient; but from the viewpoint of national strategy it was essential.

And even in the narrower military sense the political patronage system produced great benefits for the North, for without it Ulysses S. Grant and William Tecumseh Sherman might not have gotten their start up the chain of command. Although West Point graduates, both men had resigned from the pre-war army and neither was conspicuous at the outbreak of the war. But Sherman happened to be the brother of an influential Republican senator from Ohio and Grant happened to be a friend of an influential Republican congressman from Illinois. These fortuitous political connections got them their initial commissions in the army. The rest is history—but had it not been for the political dictates of national strategy, they might never have been able to make their mark on the history of military strategy.

Clausewitz describes two kinds of national strategy in war. One is the conquest of a certain amount of the enemy's territory or the defense of one's own territory from enemy conquest. The second is the overthrow of the enemy's political system. The first usually means a limited war ended by a negotiated peace. The second usually means a total war ending in unconditional surrender by the loser.¹⁰ These are absolute or ideal types, of course; in the real world some wars are a mixture of both types. In American history most of our wars have been mainly of the first, limited type: the Revolution, which did seek the overthrow of British political power in the thirteen colonies but not elsewhere; the War of 1812; the Mexican War; the Spanish-American War; the Korean War. American goals in World War I were mixed: primarily they involved the limited aims of defending the territory and right of self-government of European nationalities, but in effect this required the overthrow of the German and Austro-Hungarian monarchies. In Vietnam the American goal was mainly the limited one of defending the territory and sovereignty of South Vietnam and its anti-Communist government, but this was mixed with the purpose of overthrowing the political and social system that prevailed in part of South Vietnam and involved attacks on that system in North Vietnam as well.

World War II and the Civil War were the two genuine examples in American history of Clausewitz's second type of war—total war ending in unconditional surrender and the overthrow of the enemy's political system. By total war I mean not only this absolute war aim but also the total mobilization of a nation's population and resources for a prolonged conflict

that ends only when the armed forces and resources of one side are totally exhausted or destroyed.

Common sense, not to mention Clausewitz, will tell us that there must be congruity between national and military strategy. That is, an all-out war to overthrow the enemy requires total mobilization and a military strategy to destroy the enemy's armies, resources, and morale, while a limited war requires a limited military strategy to gain or defend territory. When national and military strategy become inconsistent with each other—when the armed forces adopt or want to adopt an unlimited military strategy to fight a limited war, or vice versa—then a nation fights at cross purposes, with dissension or failure the likely outcome. This can happen when a war that is initially limited in purpose takes on a momentum, a life of its own that carries the participants beyond their original commitment without a proper redefinition of war aims—for example World War I, which became a total war in military strategy without a concomitant redefinition of national strategy and ended in an armistice instead of unconditional surrender. But it produced a peace treaty that Germany resented as a *Diktat* because it treated the Germans as if they had surrendered unconditionally. This in turn generated a stab-in-the-back legend that facilitated the rise of Hitler.

One of the reasons why Allied powers in World War II insisted on unconditional surrender was their determination that this time there must be no armistice, no stab-in-the-back legend, no doubt on the part of the defeated peoples that they had been utterly beaten and their Fascist governments overthrown. The Allies won World War II because they had a clear national strategy and a military strategy in harmony with it—along with the resources to do the job. In the Korean War, disharmony between President Truman, who insisted on a limited war, and General MacArthur, who wanted to fight an unlimited one, resulted in MacArthur's dismissal and a sense of frustration among many Americans who wanted to overthrow the Communist government of North Korea and perhaps of China as well. In Vietnam, the controversy and failure resulted from an inability of the government to define clearly the American national strategy. This inability resulted in turn from deep and bitter divisions in American society over the national purpose in this conflict. Without a clear national strategy to guide them, the armed forces could not develop an effective military strategy.

The Civil War confronted the Union government with these same dangers of unclear national strategy and a consequent confusion of purpose between national and military strategy. Like World War I, the Civil War started out as one kind of war and evolved into something quite different. But in contrast to World War I, the government of the victorious side in the Civil War developed a national strategy to give purpose to a military strategy of total war, and preserved a political majority in support of this national strategy through dark days of defeat, despair, and division. This was the real strategic

contribution of Abraham Lincoln to Union victory. His role in shaping a national strategy of unconditional surrender by the Confederacy was more important to the war's outcome than his endless hours at the War Department sending telegrams to generals and devising strategic combinations to defeat Confederate armies.

In one sense, from the beginning the North fought Clausewitz's second type of war—to overthrow the enemy's government—for the Northern war aim was to bring Confederate states back into the Union. But Lincoln waged this war on the legal theory that since secession was unconstitutional, Southern states were still *in* the Union and the Confederate government was not a legitimate government. Lincoln's first war action, the proclamation of April 15, 1861, calling for 75,000 militia to serve for ninety days, declared that their purpose would be to "suppress . . . combinations too powerful to be suppressed by the ordinary course of judicial proceedings."¹¹ In other words this was a domestic insurrection, a rebellion by certain lawless citizens, not a war between nations. Throughout the war Lincoln maintained this legal fiction; he never referred to Confederate states or to Confederates, but to rebel states and rebels. Thus, the North fought the war on the theory not of overthrowing an enemy state or even conquering enemy territory, but of suppressing insurrection and restoring authority in its own territory. This national strategy was based on an assumption that a majority of the Southern people were loyal to the Union and that eleven states had been swept into secession by the passions of the moment. Once the United States demonstrated its firmness by regaining control of its forts and other property in the South, those presumed legions of loyal Unionists would regain political control of their states and resume their normal allegiance to the United States. In his first message to Congress, nearly three months after the firing on Fort Sumter, Lincoln questioned "whether there is, to-day, a majority of the legally qualified voters of any State, except perhaps South Carolina, in favor of disunion." And to show that he would temper firmness with restraint, Lincoln promised that while suppressing insurrection the federalized militia would avoid "any devastation, any destruction of, or interference with, property, or any disturbance of peaceful citizens."¹²

This was a national strategy of limited war—very limited, indeed scarcely war at all, but a police action to quell a rather large riot. This limited national strategy required a limited military strategy, so General-in-Chief Winfield Scott—himself a loyal Virginian who shared the government's faith in Southern Unionism—came up with such a strategy, which was soon labelled the Anaconda Plan. This plan called for a blockade of Southern salt-water ports by the navy and a campaign down the Mississippi by a combined army and fresh-water naval task force to split the Confederacy and surround most of it with a blue cordon. Having thus sealed off the rebels from the world, Scott

would squeeze them firmly—like an Anaconda snake—but with restraint until Southerners came to their senses and returned to the Union.

Lincoln approved this plan, which remained a part of Northern military strategy through the war. But he also yielded to public pressure to invade Virginia, attack the rebel force at Manassas, and capture Richmond before the Confederate Congress met there in July. This went beyond the Anaconda Plan, but was still part of a limited-war strategy to regain United States territory and disperse the illegitimate rebel Congress in order to put down the rebellion within ninety days. But this effort led to the humiliating Union defeat at Bull Run and to an agonizing reappraisal by the North of the war's scope and strategy. It was now clear that this might be a long, hard war requiring more fighting and a greater mobilization of resources than envisioned by the restrained squeezing of the Anaconda Plan. Congress authorized the enlistment of a million three-year volunteers, and by early 1862 nearly 700,000 Northerners as well as more than 300,000 Southerners were under arms. This was no longer a police action to suppress rioters, but a full-scale war.

Its legal character had also changed, by actions of the Lincoln administration itself. Even while insisting that this conflict was a domestic insurrection, Lincoln proclaimed a blockade of Confederate ports. A blockade was recognized by international law as an instrument of war between sovereign nations. Moreover, after first stating an intention to execute captured Southern crewmen of privateers as pirates, the administration backed down when the Confederacy threatened to retaliate by executing Union prisoners of war. Captured privateers as well as soldiers became prisoners of war, and the Union government finally concluded a cartel for exchange of war prisoners, another proceeding recognized by international law as a form of agreement between nations at war.

Thus, by 1862, the Lincoln administration had, in effect, conceded that this conflict was a war between belligerent governments each in control of a large amount of territory. Nevertheless, the Northern war aim was still restoration of national authority over the territory controlled by rebels but not the overthrow of their fundamental political or social institutions. This limited-war aim called for a limited military strategy of conquering and occupying territory—Clausewitz's first type of war. In the winter and spring of 1861-62, Union forces enjoyed a great deal of success in this effort. With the help of local Unionists they gained control of western Virginia and detached it from the Confederacy to form the new Union state of West Virginia. The Union navy with army support gained lodgements along the south Atlantic coast from Norfolk to St. Augustine. The navy achieved its most spectacular success with the capture of New Orleans in April 1862 while army troops occupied part of Southern Louisiana. Meanwhile, two Union naval forces drove up and down the Mississippi until they gained control of

Conceded war strategy

all of it except a 200-mile stretch between Vicksburg, Mississippi and Port Hudson, Louisiana. Union armies under Ulysses Grant and Don Carlos Buell, supported by river gunboats, captured Forts Henry and Donelson, occupied Nashville and most of Tennessee, penetrated far up the Tennessee River into northern Alabama, and defeated a Confederate counterattack in the bloody battle of Shiloh. In May 1862, the large and well-trained Army of the Potomac under George B. McClellan drove Confederates all the way up the Virginia Peninsula to within five miles of Richmond while panic seized the Southern capital and the Confederate government prepared to evacuate it. The war for Southern independence seemed to be on its last legs. The *New York Tribune* proclaimed in May 1862 that "the rebels themselves are panic-stricken, or despondent. It now requires no very far-reaching prophet to predict the end of this struggle."¹³

But the *Tribune* proved to be a poor prophet. The Confederacy picked itself up from the floor and fought back. Guerrilla attacks and cavalry raids in Tennessee and Mississippi struck Union supply bases and transport networks. Stonewall Jackson drove the Federals out of the Shenandoah Valley; Robert E. Lee drove them away from Richmond and off the Peninsula; in the Western theater Vicksburg foiled the initial Union efforts to capture it and open the Mississippi; while Confederate Generals Braxton Bragg and Kirby Smith maneuvered the Yankees out of Tennessee and invaded Kentucky at the same time that Lee smashed them at Second Bull Run and invaded Maryland. In four months Confederate armies had counterpunched so hard that they had Union forces on the ropes. The limited-war strategy of conquering Southern territory clearly would not do the job so long as Confederate armies remained intact and strong.

General Grant was one of the first to recognize this. Before the battle of Shiloh, easy Northern victories at Forts Henry and Donelson and elsewhere in the West had convinced him that the Confederacy was a hollow shell about to collapse. After the rebels had counterattacked and nearly ruined him at Shiloh, however, Grant said that he "gave up all idea of saving the Union except by complete conquest."¹⁴ By complete conquest he meant not merely occupation of territory, but destruction of enemy armies, which thereafter became Grant's chief strategic goal. It became Lincoln's goal too. "Destroy the rebel army," he instructed McClellan before the battle of Antietam, and when McClellan proved unable or unwilling to do so, Lincoln removed him from command. In 1863, Lincoln told General Hooker that "Lee's *army*, and not *Richmond*, is your true objective point." When Lee again invaded the North, Lincoln instructed Hooker that this "gives you back the chance (to destroy the enemy far from his base) that I thought McClellan lost last fall." When Hooker hesitated and complained, Lincoln replaced him with George Meade who won the battle of Gettysburg but failed to pursue and attack Lee vigorously as Lincoln implored him to do. "Great God!" said the distraught

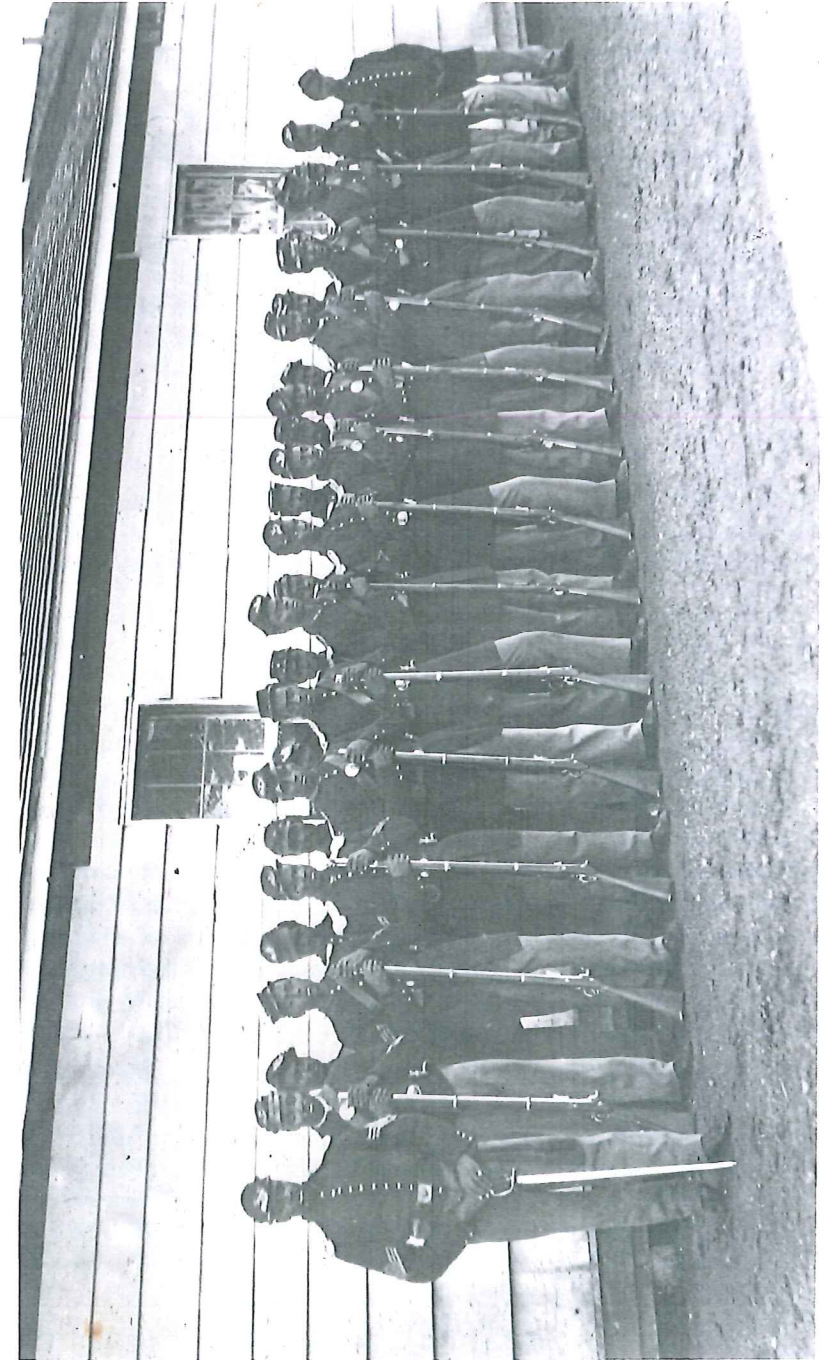
President when he learned that Meade had let Lee get back across the Potomac without further damage. "Our Army held the war in the hollow of their hand and would not close it."¹⁵ Lincoln did not remove Meade, but brought Grant east to oversee him while leaving Sherman in command in the West. By 1864, Lincoln finally had generals in top commands who believed in destroying enemy armies.

Lincoln
Grant
Sherman

This was a large step toward total war, but it was not the final step. When Grant said that Shiloh convinced him that the rebellion could be crushed only by complete conquest, he added that this included the destruction of any property or other resources used to sustain Confederate armies as well as of those armies themselves. Before Shiloh, wrote Grant in his memoirs, he had been careful "to protect the property of the citizens whose territory was invaded;" afterwards his policy was to "consume everything that could be used to support or supply armies." Grant's principal subordinate in the Western theater was Sherman, whose experience in Tennessee and Mississippi where guerrillas sheltered by the civilian population wreaked havoc behind Union lines convinced him that "we are not only fighting hostile armies, but a hostile people, and must make (them) feel the hard hand of war."¹⁶

Confiscation of enemy property used in support of war was a recognized belligerent right under international law; by the summer of 1862, Union armies in the South had begun to do this on a large scale. The war had come a long way since Lincoln's initial promise "to avoid any devastation, any destruction of, or interference with, property." Now even civilian property such as crops in the field or livestock in the barn was fair game, since these things could be used to feed Confederate armies. Congress sanctioned this policy with a limited confiscation act in August 1861 and a more sweeping act in July 1862. General-in-Chief Halleck gave shape to the policy in August 1862 with orders to Grant about treatment of Confederate sympathizers in Union-occupied territory. "Handle that class without gloves," Halleck told Grant, and "take their property for public use. . . . It is time that they should begin to feel the presence of the war."¹⁷

Lincoln also sanctioned this bare-knuckle policy by the summer of 1862. He had come around slowly to such a position, for it did not conform to the original national strategy of slapping rebels on the wrist with one hand while gently beckoning the hosts of Southern Unionists back into the fold with the other. In his message to Congress on December 3, 1861, Lincoln had deprecated radical action against Southern property. "In considering the policy to be adopted for suppressing the insurrection," he said, "I have been anxious and careful that the inevitable conflict for this purpose shall not degenerate into a violent and remorseless revolutionary struggle."¹⁸ But, during the epic campaigns and battles of 1862, the war did become violent and remorseless, and it would soon become revolutionary.



The arming of Blacks for the Union war effort was both a poignant symbol and a powerful weapon for Lincoln's strategy of unconditional surrender. Pictured here is Company E of the 4th U.S. Colored Troops, a unit that saw much action in Virginia during the war's final year.

Like Grant, Lincoln lost faith in those illusory Southern Unionists and became convinced that the rebellion could be put down only by complete conquest. To a Southern Unionist and a Northern conservative who complained in July 1862 about the government's seizure of civilian property and suppression of civil liberties in occupied Louisiana, Lincoln replied angrily that those supposed Unionists had had their chance to overcome the rebel faction in Louisiana and had done nothing but grumble about the army's vigorous enforcement of Union authority. "The paralysis—the dead palsy—of the government in this whole struggle," said Lincoln, "is that this class of men will do nothing for the government, nothing for themselves, except demand that the government shall not strike its open enemies, lest they be struck by accident!" The administration could no longer pursue "a temporizing and forbearing" policy toward the South, said Lincoln. Conservatives and Southerners who did not like the new policy should blame the rebel fire-eaters who started the war. They must understand, said Lincoln sternly, "that they cannot experiment for ten years trying to destroy the government, and if they fail still come back into the Union unhurt." Did they expect the North, Lincoln asked sarcastically, to fight the war "with elder-stalk squirts, charged with rose water?"¹⁹

This exchange concerned slavery as well as other kinds of Southern property. Slaves were, of course, the South's most valuable and vulnerable form of property. Lincoln's policy toward slavery became a touchstone of the evolution of this conflict from a limited war to restore the old Union to a total war to destroy the Southern social as well as political system.

During 1861, Lincoln reiterated his oft-repeated pledge that he had no intention of interfering with slavery in the states where it already existed. In July of that year Congress endorsed this position by passing the Crittenden-Johnson resolution affirming the purpose of the war to be preservation of the Union and not interference with the "established institutions"—that is, slavery—of the seceded states. Since those states, in the administration's theory, were still legally *in* the Union, they continued to enjoy all their constitutional rights, including slavery.

Abolitionists and radical Republicans who wanted to turn this conflict into a war to abolish slavery expressed a different theory. They maintained that by seceding and making war on the United States, Southern states had forfeited their rights under the Constitution. Radicals pointed out that the blockade and the treatment of captured rebel soldiers as prisoners of war had established the belligerent status of the Confederacy as a power at war with the United States. Thus its slaves could be confiscated as enemy property. The confiscation act passed by Congress in August 1861 did authorize a limited degree of confiscation of slaves who had been employed directly in support of the Confederate military effort.

Two Union generals went even farther than this. In September 1861, John C. Frémont, commander of Union forces in the border slave state of Missouri, proclaimed martial law in the state and declared the slaves of all Confederate sympathizers free. General David Hunter did the same the following spring in the "Department of the South"—the states of South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida where Union forces occupied a few beachheads along the coast.

Lincoln revoked both of these military edicts. He feared that they would alienate the Southern Unionists he was still cultivating, especially those in the border states of Kentucky, Missouri, and Maryland who had kept their states in the Union but might take them out if the North turned this war for the Union into a war against slavery. Lincoln considered the allegiance of these states crucial; he would like to have God on his side, he reportedly said, but he must have Kentucky, and Frémont's emancipation order would probably "ruin our rather fair prospect for Kentucky" if he let it stand.²⁰ Moreover, Lincoln at this time was trying to maintain a bipartisan coalition on behalf of the war effort. Nearly half of the Northern people had voted Democratic in 1860. They supported a war for the Union but many of them probably would not support a war against slavery. General McClellan, himself a Democrat as well as the North's most prominent general in 1862, warned Lincoln about this in an unsolicited letter of advice concerning national strategy in July 1862, after he had been driven back from Richmond in the Seven Days battles. "It should not be a war looking to the subjugation of the (Southern) people," the General instructed the President. "Neither confiscation of property . . . (n)or forcible abolition of slavery should be contemplated for a moment. . . . A declaration of radical views, especially upon slavery, will rapidly disintegrate our present armies."²¹

But by this time Lincoln had begun to move precisely in the direction that McClellan advised against. He had concluded that McClellan's conservative counsel on national strategy was of a piece with the General's cautious and unsuccessful military strategy—fighting with "elder-stalk squirts, charged with rose water," as Lincoln put it. By July 1862, when he read this letter from McClellan, Lincoln had made up his mind to issue an emancipation proclamation.

He came to this decision only after a long and frustrating effort to persuade the border states to take the first steps toward gradual emancipation. Lincoln proposed such a program in March 1862. He prevailed on Congress to pass a resolution offering federal financial aid to any state undertaking compensated emancipation. Lincoln thought of this as a means of strengthening the Northern war effort by inducing the border states to join the ranks of free states and thereby to deprive the Confederacy of any hope of attracting these states to their side. Three times in the spring and summer of 1862 Lincoln appealed to the congressmen from border states to endorse this plan.

At first he relied on the rhetoric of persuasion. The changes produced by gradual emancipation, he said, "would come gently as the dews of heaven, not rending or wrecking anything. Will you not embrace it?" In May he admonished border-state representatives that Northern pressures for an emancipation policy were increasing. "You can not, if you would, be blind to the signs of the times," he said.²² But they did seem blind to these signs. They questioned the constitutionality of federal aid, objected to its cost, bristled at its veiled threat of government coercion, and deplored the potential race problem they feared would come with a large free black population. By July, Lincoln had moved from gentle persuasion to blunt warnings. He told border-state congressmen that "the unprecedentedly stern facts of the case" called for immediate action. Slaves were taking advantage of the war to free themselves. Tens of thousands had already escaped from their masters and come into Union lines, and this number would soon climb to hundreds of thousands. If the border states did not make "a decision at once to emancipate gradually," Lincoln said, "the institution in your states will be extinguished by (the) friction and abrasion" of war. But still they refused, voting on July 12 by a margin of twenty to nine against the President's proposal.²³

For Lincoln, this was the last straw. That very evening he made the final decision to issue an emancipation proclamation as a war measure to weaken the enemy. The next day he privately told Secretary of State Seward and Secretary of the Navy Welles of his decision. A week later he announced it formally to the Cabinet. He now believed emancipation to be "a military necessity, absolutely essential to the preservation of the Union," he told them. "The slaves (are) undeniably an element of strength to those who had their service," he went on, "and we must decide whether that element should be with us or against us. . . . We must free the slaves or be ourselves subdued." Lincoln conceded that the loyal slaveholders of border states could not be expected to take the lead in a war measure against *disloyal* slaveholders. "The blow must fall first and foremost on . . . the rebels," he told the Cabinet. They "could not at the same time throw off the Constitution and invoke its aid. . . . Having made war on the Government, they (are) subject to the incidents and calamities of war."²⁴

All members of the Cabinet agreed except Montgomery Blair, who objected that this radical measure would alienate the border states and Northern Democrats. Lincoln replied that he had done his best to cajole the border states, but now "we must make the forward movement" without them. They would not like it but they would eventually accept it. As for Northern Democrats, Lincoln was done conciliating them. The best of them, like Secretary of War Stanton, had already come over to the Republicans while the rest formed an obstructive opposition whose "clubs would be used against us take what course we might." No, said Lincoln, it was time for "decisive

and extensive measures. . . . We want the army to strike more vigorous blows. The Administration must set an example, and strike at the heart of the rebellion."²⁵

We must strike at the heart of the rebellion to inspire the army to strike more vigorous blows. Here we have in a nutshell the rationale for emancipation as a military strategy of total war. It would weaken the enemy's war effort by disrupting its labor force and augment the Union war effort by converting part of that labor force to a Northern asset. Lincoln adopted Secretary of State Seward's suggestion to postpone issuing the Proclamation until Union forces won a significant victory. After the battle of Antietam Lincoln issued the preliminary Proclamation warning that on January 1, 1863, he would proclaim freedom for slaves in all states or portions of states then in rebellion against the United States. January 1 came, and with it the Proclamation applying to all or parts of ten Southern states in which, by virtue of his war powers as Commander-in-Chief, Lincoln declared all slaves "forever free" as "a fit and necessary measure for suppressing said rebellion."²⁶

Democrats bitterly opposed the Proclamation, and the war became thereafter primarily a Republican war instead of a bipartisan war. Some Democrats in the officer corps of the army also complained, and seemed ready to rally around McClellan as a symbol of this opposition. But by January 1863, McClellan was out of the army and several other Democratic generals were also soon removed or reassigned. Most Union soldiers understood and accepted the rationale of emancipation as a military measure to help win the war. To the extent that this measure moved the Democrats toward the position of an antiwar party, it started the process by which an overwhelming majority of soldiers became Republicans. An Indiana colonel put it this way early in 1863: "There is a desire (among my men) to destroy everything that in (any way) gives the rebels strength." Therefore "this army will sustain the emancipation proclamation and enforce it with the bayonet." About the same time General-in-Chief Halleck instructed army commanders that "the character of the war has very much changed within the last year. There is now no possible hope of reconciliation with the rebels. . . . We must conquer the rebels or be conquered by them. . . . Every slave withdrawn from the enemy is the equivalent of a white (soldier withdrawn from) combat." One of Grant's field commanders explained that "the policy is to be terrible on the enemy. I am using negroes all the time for my work as teamsters, and have 1,000 employed."²⁷

This military strategy of "being terrible on the enemy" soon went beyond using emancipated slaves as teamsters and the like. Two congressional acts in 1862 had authorized the enlistment of blacks as soldiers, and the Emancipation Proclamation also announced an intention to do so. Implementation of such a truly revolutionary policy of putting arms in the hands of former slaves to fight their former masters proceeded slowly and hesitantly

at first. But by early 1863, the administration was moving full speed ahead on this matter. In March, Lincoln wrote to Andrew Johnson, military governor of occupied Tennessee: "The bare sight of fifty thousand armed, and drilled black soldiers on the banks of the Mississippi, would end the rebellion at once. And who doubts that we can present that sight if we but take hold in earnest." By August 1863, the Union army had recruited those 50,000 and Lincoln stated in a public letter addressed to dissenting conservatives that "the emancipation policy, and the use of colored troops, constitute the heaviest blow yet dealt to the rebellion."²⁸

Emancipation, then, became a crucial part of Northern military strategy, an important means of winning the war. But if it remained merely a *means* it would not be a part of national strategy—that is, of the *purpose* for which the war was being fought. Nor would it meet the criterion that military strategy itself should be consistent with national strategy, for it would be inconsistent to fight a war using the weapon of emancipation to restore a Union that still contained slaves. Lincoln recognized this. Although restoration of the Union remained his first priority, the abolition of slavery became an end as well as a means, a war aim virtually inseparable from Union itself. The first step in making it so came in the Emancipation Proclamation, which Lincoln pronounced "an act of justice" as well as a military necessity. Of course, the border states, along with Tennessee and small enclaves elsewhere in the Confederate states, were not covered by the Proclamation because they were under Union control and not at war with the United States and thus exempt from an Executive action that could legally be based only on the President's war powers. But Lincoln kept up his pressure on the border states to adopt emancipation themselves. With his support, leaders committed to the abolition of slavery gained political power in Maryland and Missouri and pushed through constitutional amendments that abolished slavery in these states before the end of the war.

Lincoln's presidential reconstruction policy, announced in December 1863, offered pardon and amnesty to Southerners who took an oath of allegiance to the Union *and* to all wartime policies concerning slavery and emancipation. Reconstructed governments sponsored by Lincoln in Louisiana, Arkansas, and Tennessee abolished slavery in those states—at least in the portions of them controlled by Union troops—before the war ended. West Virginia came in as a new state in 1863 with a Constitution pledged to abolish slavery. And in 1864, Lincoln took the lead in getting the Republican national convention that renominated him to adopt a platform calling for a Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution prohibiting slavery everywhere in the United States forever. Because slavery was "hostile to the principles of republican government, justice, and national safety," declared the platform, Republicans vowed to accomplish its "utter and complete extirpation from the soil of the republic." Emancipation had thus become an end as well as a means of

Union victory; as Lincoln put it in his Gettysburg Address, the North fought from 1863 on for "a new birth of freedom."²⁹

Most Southerners agreed with Jefferson Davis that emancipation and the Northern enlistment of black soldiers were "the most execrable measures in the history of guilty man." Davis and his Congress announced an intention to execute Union officers captured in states affected by the Emancipation Proclamation as "criminals engaged in inciting servile insurrection."³⁰ The Confederacy did not carry out this threat, but it did return many captured black soldiers to slavery. And Southern military units did, on several occasions, murder captured black soldiers and their officers instead of taking them prisoner.

Emancipation and the enlistment of slaves as soldiers tremendously increased the stakes in this war, for the South as well as for the North. Southerners vowed to fight "to the last ditch" before yielding to a Yankee nation that could commit such execrable deeds. Gone was any hope of an armistice or a negotiated peace so long as the Lincoln administration was in power; the alternatives were reduced starkly to Southern independence on the one hand or the unconditional surrender of the South on the other.

By midsummer 1864 it looked like the former alternative—Southern independence—was likely to prevail. This was one of the bleakest periods of the war for the North. Its people had watched the beginning of Grant's and Sherman's military campaigns in the spring with high hopes that they would finally crush the rebellion within a month or two. But by July, Grant was bogged down before Petersburg after his army had suffered enormous casualties in a vain effort to hammer Lee into submission, while Sherman seemed similarly stymied in his attempt to capture Atlanta and break up the Confederate army defending it. War weariness and defeatism corroded the morale of Northerners as they contemplated the seemingly endless cost of this war in the lives of their young men. Informal peace negotiations between Horace Greeley and Confederate agents in Canada and between two Northern citizens and Jefferson Davis in Richmond during July succeeded only in eliciting the uncompromising terms of both sides. Lincoln wrote down his terms for Greeley in these words: "The restoration of the Union and abandonment of slavery." Davis made his terms equally clear: "We are fighting for INDEPENDENCE and that, or extermination, we will have."³¹ As Lincoln later commented on this exchange, Davis "does not attempt to deceive us. He affords us no excuse to deceive ourselves. He cannot voluntarily reaccept the Union; we cannot voluntarily yield it. Between him and us the issue is distinct, simple, and inflexible. It is an issue which can only be tried by war, and decided by victory."³²

This was Lincoln's most direct affirmation of unconditional surrender as the *sine qua non* of his national strategy. In it he mentioned Union as the only inflexible issue between North and South, but events in the late summer

of 1864 gave Lincoln ample opportunity to demonstrate that he now considered emancipation to be an integral part of that inflexible issue of Union. Northern morale dropped to a low ebb in August. "The people are wild for peace," reported Republican political leaders. Northern Democrats were calling the war a failure and preparing to nominate McClellan on a platform demanding an armistice and peace negotiations. Democratic propagandists had somehow managed to convince their own party faithful, and a good many Republicans as well, that Lincoln's insistence on coupling emancipation with Union was the only stumbling block to peace negotiations, despite Jefferson Davis's insistence that Union itself was the stumbling block. Some Republican leaders put enormous pressure on Lincoln to smoke Davis out on this issue by offering peace with Union as the sole condition. To do so would, of course, give the impression of backing down on emancipation as a war aim.

These pressures filled Lincoln with dismay. The "sole purpose" of the war *was* to restore the Union, he told wavering Republicans. "But no human power can subdue this rebellion without using the Emancipation lever as I have done." More than 100,000 black soldiers were fighting for the Union, and their efforts were crucial to Northern victory. They would not continue fighting 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 risked their lives 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 & enemies, come what will."³³

Nevertheless, Lincoln did waver temporarily in the face of the overwhelming pressure to drop emancipation as a precondition of peace. He drafted a private letter to a Northern Democrat that included this sentence: "If Jefferson Davis wishes to know what I would do if he were to offer peace and re-union, saying nothing about slavery, let him try me." And Lincoln also drafted instructions for Henry Raymond, editor of the *New York Times* and chairman of the Republican national committee, to go to Richmond as a special envoy to propose "that upon the restoration of the Union and the national authority, the war shall cease at once, all remaining questions to be left for adjustment by peaceful modes." But Lincoln did not send the letter and he decided against sending Raymond to Richmond. Even though the President was convinced in August 1864 that he would not be re-elected, he decided that to give the appearance of backing down on emancipation "would be worse than losing the Presidential contest."³⁴

In the end, of course, Lincoln achieved a triumphant re-election because Northern spirits soared after Sherman's capture of Atlanta and Sheridan's smashing victories in the Shenandoah Valley during September and October.

Soon after the election Sherman began his devastating march from Atlanta to the sea. George Thomas's Union army in Tennessee destroyed John Bell Hood's Confederate Army of Tennessee at the battles of Franklin and Nashville. One disaster followed another for the Confederates during the winter of 1864-65, while Lincoln reiterated his determination to accept no peace short of unconditional surrender. And he left the South in no doubt of that determination. In his message to Congress on December 6, Lincoln cited statistics showing that the Union army and navy were the largest in the world, Northern population was growing, and Northern war production increasing. Union resources, he announced, "are unexhausted, and . . . inexhaustible. . . . We are *gaining* strength, and may, if need be, maintain the contest indefinitely."³⁵

This was a chilling message to the South, whose resources were just about exhausted. Once more men of good will on both sides tried to set up peace negotiations to stop the killing. On February 3, 1865, Lincoln himself and Secretary of State Seward met with three high Confederate officials including Vice-President Alexander Stephens on board a Union ship anchored at Hampton Roads, Virginia. During four hours of talks Lincoln budged not an inch from his minimum conditions for peace, which he described as: "1) The restoration of the National authority throughout all the States. 2) No receding by the Executive of the United States on the Slavery question. 3) No cessation of hostilities short of an end of the war, and the disbanding of all forces hostile to the government." The Confederate commissioners returned home empty-handed, angry because they considered these terms, in their words, "nothing less than unconditional surrender."³⁶ Of course they were, but Lincoln had never during the past two years given the South any reason to expect otherwise.

The Northern President returned to Washington to prepare his second inaugural address, which ranks in its eloquence and its evocation of the meaning of this war with the Gettysburg Address itself. Reviewing the past four years, Lincoln admitted that neither side had "expected for the war, the magnitude, or the duration, which it has already achieved. Each looked for an easier triumph, and a result less fundamental and astounding." Back in the days when the North looked for an easier triumph, Lincoln might have added, he had pursued a national strategy of limited war for a restoration of the *status quo ante bellum*. But when the chances of an easy triumph disappeared, Lincoln grasped the necessity of adopting a strategy of total war to overthrow the enemy's social and political system.

Whatever flaws historians might find in Lincoln's military strategy, it is hard to find fault with his national strategy. His sense of timing and his sensitivity to the pulse of the Northern people were superb. As he once told a visiting delegation of abolitionists, if he had issued the Emancipation Proclamation six months sooner than he did, "public sentiment would not

have sustained it."³⁷ And if he had waited until six months later, he might have added, it would have come too late.

After steering a skillful course between proslavery Democrats and antislavery Republicans during the first eighteen months of war, Lincoln guided a new majority coalition of Republicans and War Democrats through the uncharted waters of total war and emancipation filled with sharp reefs and rocks, emerging triumphant into a second term on a platform of unconditional surrender that gave the nation a new birth of freedom. Lincoln hoped to achieve a just and lasting peace with malice toward none and charity for all. But until the rebels laid down their arms unconditionally, the war must go on. "Fondly do we hope," said the sixteenth President at the beginning of his second term, "fervently do we pray that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet if God wills that it continue, until all the wealth piled by the bond-man's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash, shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so it must be said 'the judgments of the Lord, are true and righteous altogether.'" ³⁸

Notes

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