

History 225
Notes w/ Berlin article assigned

QTF

Question de Jour: Who Freed the Slaves?

From T.C. Mits Lincoln freed the slaves with the Ep and then the 13th Amendment.

Professional historians might give a different answer. On the one hand this, and on the other that.

Point to Lincoln's initial hesitation as reflected in the original war aim; his firing or reprimand of Union generals who early on in the war freed slaves and even threatened to use them in the Union's military cause. (We have seen examples of Fremont and "Black Dave" Hunter); Lincoln's early indications about colonization of once freed blacks, indicating that he was not convinced that blacks really could be an integral part of the American experience after freedom (strains of white supremacy from the Great Emancipator).

What is Ira Berlin's view in his piece from the Washington Post?

Berlin was the chief editor of the masterful multivolume collection entitled Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861-1867 (Cambridge Press).

That the slaves freed themselves.

Some of these historians have argued that depicting Lincoln as "the Great Emancipator" is a white myth perpetrated upon our history and blacks in particular, to rob blacks of the idea of their own empowerment to achieve their own freedom. That with Lincoln or without him blacks would have achieved their freedom. That nothing could have withheld the tide that swept toward freedom by 1863.

In saying this are they creating another myth?

Reasons:

Could the slaves have won their freedom without the Civil War. The answer has to be a clear no. No slave revolt had succeeded in over the two hundred years of slavery. By 1860 the institution was stronger in the South than at any other time. It was more profitable, more entrenched, and the slave power more dominant in the South than at any other time.

It took the war to end slavery. And this brings Lincoln onto center stage.

It was Lincoln's public record as a politician and his History

History 225

Re: Notes w/ Berlin article
page two

of speaking out against the institution as a great moral wrong that convinced southern leaders to seceded from the Union upon his election because Lincoln was the personification of the containment of slavery and its ultimate extinction.

Lincoln had made 175 public speeches in over 6 years in which he pilloried slavery as a disgrace and called for its ultimate extinction. There was no mistaking where he stood on this issue by southerners when he was politking for high office.

Had there been no Lincoln or had he not run for office and won in 1860 the South would not have seceded from the Union. It was in this act of secesion to preserve slavery that ironically was the very action that would guarantee its overthrow.

It was Lincoln who decided that Sumter had to be provisioned knowing all the time that this would set off the guns of war.

It was Lincoln who opposed any Republican support for the Crittenden Compromise while he was president-elect when many in his party and Cabinet advisers wanted to final a compromise solution even if it meant compromising the Republican doctrine of containment; and many who were for surrendering Ft. Sumter.

[Students] will see that as late as August of 1864 the outcome of the war was not certain. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia's defense of Richmond/Petersberg front was costing the Union hideous casualties. The war in the west was stalled outside of Atlanta. There was talk in Republian ranks and in northern flagship papers like the NY Tribune that Lincoln should negotiate a settlement of the war with Jeff Davis even if it meant surrendering the 2nd war aim and abandoning the Emancipation Proclamation to entice Richmond to end the war and return back into the Unin with slavery intact.

Lincoln himself was certain in August of 1864 that he would be driven out of office and the Democrat McClellan would be the next president. Still he refused to submit to the pressures. The war under his command would continue to be fought out on the lines of unionification and abolitionism. THIS WAS HIS FINEST HOUR.

Those who argue that the tide of self-emancipation by the slaves was too much or a groundswell to be turned back have to acknowledge that revolutions can go backward. We'll see this with the story of Reconstruction. Moreover, whenever Union troops retreated in this war, as soon as Confederate forces moved into these areas they re-enslaved blacks. Lee enslaved free blacks when he entered Pennsylvania in 1863. Black Union soldiers taken as pows (if they were not killed on the spot)were auctioned off as a slaves and not treated as prisoners of war.

History 225
Re: Notes w/ Berlin article
Page three

I am not questioning the fact that there was human agency where the slaves were concerned. Slaves took enormous risks in fleeing from their owners into the wake of Union forces as they invaded the southland. But self-emancipation is not the same as being liberated and freed and staying free by the force of Union arms. Point is: emancipation was different from the abolition of the institution of slavery.

Freedom for the slave literally grew out of the barrel of the gun of Union forces. And it was Lincoln who was the commander-in-chief of these armies; gave direction and purpose to its generals; and set Union policy.

* Point here: emancipation could be reversed. Abolition of slavery as an institution had to be accomplished by military coercion.