

History 225

Re: Notes on EP/Billy Yank's views

Source: McPherson, What They Fought For (1994)

The moral crisis (winter/spring of 1862-1863)

This question of emancipation was the topic of hot debates around Federal camp fires during a six month period.

These divisions over the rightness or wrongness of the Union's new war aim sapped the morale of Union troops. Union opinion was in a state of flux. It moved in fits and starts toward an eventual majority in favor of abolishing slavery as the only way to win the war and preserve the Union. This was especially true within the Army of the Potomac.

It was this army that had lost McClellan as its commander; suffered the disaster of Fredericksburg in December 1862; and then the fiasco of the Mud March under Hooker at Chancellorsville. These were demoralizing events to be sure and provide a context for the news of the EP.

There were mounting disertions in the Army of the Potomac and the EP was blamed for this--a handy scapegoat.

Beginning in the summer of 1863 a good many antiemancipation soldiers began to change their tune. Probably two major reasons for this:

Part was the backlash among the men against the Peace Democrats and their zeroing in on the Emancipation Proclamation in the election of 1862. Democrats attacking Lincoln and the EP was the same as attacking the war and the Union sacrifices to preserve the Union. Many soldiers (and many were former Democrats) took this very personally. They would stand by the government right or wrong and see the thing through to the finish.

The second factor was the growing realization among the troops that emancipation really hurt the enemy and helped their own side. Many that had been confirmed opponents of freeing the slaves and recruiting blacks into this White Man's War were turning up confirmed abolitionists, with an attitude.

This transformation was accelerated among the majority of Union soldiers once the sable arm was given the opportunity to join in the combat. (More on this when we get to Glaathar essay).

The shift was most dramatically confirmed when 80% of Union troops who voted in the 1864 election voted for Lincoln over McClellan. This was a pretty fair indication of Union sentiment on slavery by that time.