

Chapter Twenty-seven

“The Hour Comes for Dealing with Slavery”:

Playing the Last Trump Card

(January-July 1862)

The failure of the Peninsular campaign marked a key turning point in the war. If McClellan had won, his triumph – combined with other successes of Union arms that spring, including the capture of New Orleans, Memphis, and Nashville – might well have ended the war with slavery virtually untouched. But in the wake of such a major Union defeat, Lincoln decided that the peculiar institution must no longer be treated gently. It was time, he thought, to deal with it head-on. As he told the artist Francis B. Carpenter in 1864, "It had got to be midsummer, 1862. Things had gone on from bad to worse, until I felt that we had reached the end of our rope on the plan of operations we had been pursuing; that we had about played our last card, and must change our tactics, or lose the game! I now determined upon the adoption of the emancipation policy."¹ On July 26, the president used similar language in warning Reverdy Johnson that his forbearance was legendary but finite.² To New York attorney Edwards Pierrepont, Lincoln similarly

¹ Francis B. Carpenter, The Inner Life of Abraham Lincoln: Six Months at the White House (New York: Hurd and Houghton, 1867), 20-24.

² Lincoln to Reverdy Johnson, Washington, 26 July 1862, Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 5:342-43.

explained: “It is my last trump card, Judge. If that don’t do, we must give up.”³ By playing it he said he hoped to “win the trick.”⁴ To pave the way for an emancipation proclamation, Lincoln during the first half of 1862 carefully prepared the public mind with both words and deeds.

TWO STEPS FORWARD: PROPOSAL TO ABOLISH SLAVERY IN THE BORDER STATES AND IN WASHINGTON

Ever since the fall of Sumter, opponents of slavery had been urging emancipation on the president. Most appeals rested on moral grounds, but some emphasized practical considerations, like the need to prevent European powers from intervening on behalf of the South. From his diplomatic post in Madrid, Carl Schurz wrote that by emancipating the slaves, the president could best reduce the chances of such intervention. When Schurz visited the White House in early 1862, Lincoln expressed agreement: “I cannot imagine that any European power would dare to recognize and aid the Southern Confederacy if it becomes clear that the Confederacy stands for slavery and the Union for freedom.” But, the president added, he doubted that public opinion at home “was yet sufficiently prepared for it.” He wanted “to unite, and keep united, all the forces of Northern society and of the Union element in the South, especially the Border States, in the war for the Union.” With good reason he feared that “the cry of ‘abolition war,’” which an open antislavery policy would elicit, would “tend to disunite those forces and thus weaken the Union cause.”⁵

³ Maria Lydig Daly, Diary of a Union Lady, 1861-1865, ed. Harold Earl Hammond (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1962), 179 (entry for 28 September 1862).

⁴ Robert C. Winthrop, Jr., A Memoir of Robert C. Winthrop (2nd ed.; Boston: Little Brown, 1897), 229.

⁵ Carl Schurz, The Reminiscences of Carl Schurz (3 vols.; New York: McClure, 1907-1908), 2:309-310.

That January, Lincoln voiced similar doubts to abolitionists Moncure Conway and William Henry Channing, who lobbied him to emancipate the slaves and compensate their masters. (Other abolitionists also supported compensating slaveholders.)⁶ “We grow in this direction daily,” the president told them, “and I am not without hope that some great thing is to be accomplished. When the hour comes for dealing with slavery, I trust I shall be willing to act, though it costs my life; and, gentlemen, lives will be lost.” But that hour had not yet arrived.⁷ Offering a variation of Shakespeare’s dictum that “ripeness is all,” he told other militant opponents of slavery that a “man watches his pear-tree day after day, impatient for the ripening of the fruit. Let him attempt to force the process, and he may spoil both fruit and tree. But let him patiently wait, and the ripe pear at length falls into his lap!”⁸

Lincoln also fended off emancipationists by protesting that he did not cross rivers until reaching them. On January 28, 1862, the New York diarist George Templeton Strong recorded a presidential interview, leaving a valuable record of what Lincoln sounded like in conversation: “Wa-al, that reminds me of a party of Methodist parsons that was travelling in Illinois when I was a boy thar, and had a branch to cross that was pretty bad – ugly to cross, ye know, because the waters was up. And they got considerin’ and discussin’ how they should git across it, and they talked about it for two hours, and one on ’em thought they had ought to cross one way when they got there, and another

⁶ George Luther Stearns to Charles Sumner, Boston, 10 February 1862, Sumner Papers, Harvard University.

⁷ Moncure D. Conway, Autobiography: Memories and Experiences (2 vols.; Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1904), 1:161. Conway and Channing had “an extended interview” with Lincoln on 17 January 1862. Conway to his wife, Washington, 16 January 1862, and Philadelphia, 21 January 18[62], and Conway to R. W. Emerson, 22 January 18[62], Conway Papers, Columbia University.

⁸ Carpenter, Six Months at the White House, 77.

another way, and they got quarrelin' about it, till at last an old brother put in, and he says, says he, 'Brethren, this here talk ain't no use. I never cross a river until I come to it.'" (In that same interview, Lincoln said "me and the Attorney-General's very chicken-hearted!")⁹

On another occasion, Lincoln employed an equally homey story to make his point to an Ohioan who raised the topic of emancipation: "Well, you see, we've got to be mighty cautious how we manage the negro question. If we're not, we shall be like the barber out in Illinois, who was shaving a fellow with a hatchet face and lantern jaws like mine. The barber stuck his finger in his customer's mouth, to make his cheek stick out, but while shaving away he cut through the fellow's cheek and cut off his own finger!"¹⁰

Emancipationist pressure had grown intense after Lincoln overruled Frémont's proclamation liberating the slaves of disloyal Missourians. In November 1861, he had responded by trying to persuade Delaware to accept his plan of gradual, compensated emancipation. That failed. In his annual message the following month, he had suggested to Congress in a rather backhanded way that it endorse a similar plan, coupled with voluntary colonization of the freedmen. That too produced no results, though the lawmakers throughout the winter and spring debated several bills dealing with the confiscation of Confederate property and the emancipation of slaves.

Some Radicals were losing all patience. On March 6, 1862, George B. Cheever exclaimed to a fellow abolitionist: "how black the prospect looks before us!" Cheever

⁹ Allan Nevins and Milton Halsey Thomas, eds., Diary of George Templeton Strong (4 vols.; New York: Macmillan, 1952), 3:204-205 (entry for 29 January 1862).

¹⁰ "Mr. Lincoln's Last Stories," Cincinnati Gazette, 25 July 1862. Lincoln allegedly told a version of this story (which appeared in an 1818 New Haven joke book) when discussing relations with England. Abe Lincoln Laughing: Humorous Anecdotes from Original Sources by and about Abraham Lincoln, ed. P. M. Zall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 34.

feared that “we are under a military pro-slavery despotism, and the President is at length taking the active command, in behalf of slavery and against freedom.”¹¹ On November 30, when Charles Sumner pressed him to endorse a gradual emancipation plan, Lincoln replied that the Massachusetts senator was “ahead of him only a month or six weeks.”¹² As it turned out, Sumner was three months ahead of the president.

At a cabinet meeting in early March, Lincoln proposed to send Congress a message recommending that it fund a plan of gradual emancipation with financial grants to states which agreed to participate. All approved save Stanton, who objected that the Slave States would ignore such a proposal and that the scheme “commits the administration to the theory that this is not a nation, the very theory for which the secessionists are contending with force and arms.”¹³ Lincoln also showed the message to Sumner, who approved in general but persuaded the president to delete one sentence (“Should the people of the insurgent districts now reject the councils of treason, revive loyal state governments, and again send Senators and Representatives to Congress, they would, at once find themselves at peace with no institution changed, and with their just influence in the councils of the nation fully re-established.”)¹⁴ In vain Montgomery Blair urged Lincoln to include a colonization provision.¹⁵

Lincoln also read the message to Samuel Gridley Howe of the Sanitary Commission. On March 5, after meeting with the president, Howe expressed puzzlement

¹¹ Cheever to Gerrit Smith, New York, 6 March 1861, Smith Papers, Syracuse University.

¹² Memorandum, 26 April 1862, of a conversation with Sumner in November 1861, Hale, Memories of One Hundred Years (2 vols.; New York: Macmillan, 1902), 2:189-197; Sumner to John A. Andrew, Washington, 27 December 1861, Andrew Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

¹³ Frank Abial Flower, Edwin McMasters Stanton: The Autocrat of Rebellion, Emancipation, and Reconstruction (New York: W. W. Wilson, 1905), 183; Hale, Memories of One Hundred Years, 2:195.

¹⁴ Hale, Memories of One Hundred Years, 2:194-95.

¹⁵ Blair to Lincoln, Washington, 5 March 1862, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

about Lincoln's hesitation to speak out boldly, for he obviously regarded slavery as "a great stumbling block in the way of human progress, and especially of this country. He feels that whoever has a hand in its removal will stand out before posterity as a benefactor of his race." Rhetorically Howe asked: "Why in the world, then, does he not 'speak out in meetin' and relieve his mind? Simply because of his habit of procrastinating: he puts off and puts off the evil day of effort, and stands shivering with his hand on the string of the shower-bath." But Howe was convinced that the president "has at last had a change of heart, and has set his face steadily Zionward." In fact, Howe predicted that the emancipation message "will prove to be a bomb-shell. If he is not further demoralized by victories, he will be brought up to the scratch."¹⁶

On March 6, Lincoln submitted the revised proposal in a special message to Congress suggesting that it resolve "that the United States ought to co-operate with any state which may adopt gradual abolishment of slavery, giving to such state pecuniary aid, to be used by such state in it's discretion, to compensate for the inconveniences, public and private, produced by such change of system." (Abolishment was a term less likely to raise conservative hackles than abolition.) Lincoln justified the recommendation not as an act of moral righteousness but "as one of the most efficient means of self-preservation." If Maryland, Delaware, Missouri, and Kentucky could be induced to abolish slavery on their own initiative, with federal help, then the Confederacy might well despair of winning the war: "The leaders of the existing insurrection entertain the hope that this government will ultimately be forced to acknowledge the independence of some part of the disaffected region, and that all the slave states North of such part will then say 'the

¹⁶ Howe to Frank Bird, Washington, 5 March 1862, in Laura E. Richards, ed., Letters and Journals of Samuel Gridley Howe (2 vols.; Boston: D. Estes, 1906-9), 2:500-1.

Union, for which we have struggled, being already gone, we now choose to go with the Southern section.’ To deprive them of this hope, substantially ends the rebellion; and the initiation of emancipation completely deprives them of it, as to all the states initiating it. The point is not that all the states tolerating slavery would very soon, if at all, initiate emancipation; but that, while the offer is equally made to all, the more Northern shall, by such initiation, make it certain to the more Southern, that in no event, will the former ever join the latter, in their proposed confederacy.”

Though the federal government would have to pay a large sum to the states, the cost would be more than offset by the early termination of the war: “In the mere financial, or pecuniary view, any member of Congress, with the census-tables and Treasury-reports before him, can readily see for himself how very soon the current expenditures of this war would purchase, at fair valuation, all the slaves in any named State.”

The plan, Lincoln argued, would be constitutional, for under its provisions the Federal Government “sets up no claim of a right, by federal authority, to interfere with slavery within state limits, referring, as it does, the absolute control of the subject, in each case, to the state and its people, immediately interested. It is proposed as a matter of perfectly free choice with them.”

In conclusion, Lincoln hinted that if his plan were not adopted, the war might produce sudden rather than gradual emancipation. If Border State slaveowners wanted to avoid losing the money they had invested in slaves, they should support his plan: “In the annual message last December, I thought fit to say ‘The Union must be preserved; and hence all indispensable means must be employed.’ I said this, not hastily, but

deliberately. War has been made, and continues to be, an indispensable means to this end. A practical re-acknowledgement of the national authority would render the war unnecessary, and it would at once cease. If, however, resistance continues, the war must also continue; and it is impossible to foresee all the incidents, which may attend and all the ruin which may follow it. Such as may seem indispensable, or may obviously promise great efficiency towards ending the struggle, must and will come.”¹⁷

The idea was not new. In 1825, New York Senator Rufus King had proposed that the funds generated by the sale of western lands be used to compensate states abolishing slavery, a suggestion which impressed Chief Justice John Marshall very favorably. Six years later James Madison endorsed a plan to use public land funds to underwrite colonization.

As Samuel G. Howe had predicted, the message landed in the Capitol “like a bomb-shell,” creating a sensation and taking both chambers by surprise. The text was passed from hand to hand by senators, on whom it had an electrifying impact. In the House, where it was read aloud, it generated profound interest and serious discussion.¹⁸

Two days later, Lincoln gravely told Carl Schurz that he “had made the proposition in perfect good faith; it was, perhaps, the last of the kind.” If the Border States rejected it, “theirs was the responsibility.” With “an expression of deep melancholy,” he added: “An awful responsibility either way.”¹⁹

¹⁷ Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 5:144-45.

¹⁸ Washington correspondence, 6 March, New York Tribune, New York World, Philadelphia Inquirer, Philadelphia Press, 7 March 1862; Washington correspondence, 7 March, New York Herald, 8 March 1862.

¹⁹ Schurz, Reminiscences, 2:328-29.

Some abolitionists and Radicals lauded the message. To Owen Lovejoy, it proved that the president was “an anti-slavery man” who “hates human bondage.” The Illinois congressman supported the proposal even though it called for gradual rather than immediate emancipation. While Lovejoy insisted that “slavery must perish,” he maintained that he did “not mean that it must perish at once necessarily.” And while he believed “that the slaves can take care of themselves, and they should be let alone,” he did not “mean to preclude the idea of colonization that is not compulsory.”²⁰ Lydia Maria Child told Horace Greeley that the Radical press missed the “full import” of Lincoln’s message, which she thought “says plainly enough, [‘]If the rebels continue to resist, the U. S. govt. must and will resort to emancipation; and, gentlemen of the Border States, I ask you to reflect how much your slaves will be worth under those circumstances. Hadn’t you better accept of compensation from the U.S. before their market value is gone?”²¹ Moncure D. Conway called Lincoln’s message “the insertion of a wedge so neatly as to do credit to the President’s knowledge of railsplitting.”²²

Wendell Phillips, who seldom praised Lincoln, also likened the message to “a wedge – a very small wedge, but it is a wedge for all that.” Varying the image, he declared that Lincoln “had opened the door of emancipation a foot, and he (Mr. Phillips) with a coach and six, and Wm. Lloyd Garrison for a driver, would drive right through.”²³ More emphatically, Phillips told Conway, “Thank God for Old Abe! He hasn’t got to

²⁰ William F. Moore and Jane Ann Moore, eds., His Brother’s Blood: Speeches and Writings of Owen Lovejoy, 1838-64 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 320.

²¹ Child to Greeley, Wayland, Massachusetts, 9 March 1862, Lydia Maria Child: Selected Letters, 1817-1880, ed. Milton Meltzer and Patricia G. Holland (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1982), 407.

²² Moncure D. Conway to his wife Ellen, [Boston], 8 March [1862], Conway Papers, Columbia University.

²³ Phillips’s lecture at the Smithsonian, 14 March, New York Tribune, 18 March 1862; Washington Evening Star, 15 March 1862.

Caanan yet but he has set his face Zionward.”²⁴ On March 18, at the president’s request, Phillips visited the White House, where his host said that for three months he had labored on his address to Congress “all by himself, [with] no conference with his cabinet.” Though the abolitionist spellbinder spoke highly of that document, Lincoln evidently did not believe that his guest “valued the message quite enough” and told a story about an Irish toper in the legally dry state of Maine. Thirsty for alcohol, the son of Erin requested a glass of soda, asking his host: “Couldn’t ye put a drop of the crathur in it unbeknown to meself?” Just so, said Lincoln, “I’ve put a good deal of Anti Slavery in it unbeknown to themselves.” This was evidently a reference to the Border State congressmen and senators, for he went on to inform Phillips that he had instructed them “not to talk to him about slavery. They loved it & meant it should last – he hated it & meant it should die.” The president added that “if only men over 50 voted we could abolish slavery. When men are soon to face their God they are Antislavery – it is the young who support the system – unfortunately they rule too much.” Although the Bostonian was frustrated because Lincoln talked “so fast & constantly” during their one-hour interview that “it was hard to get a word in edgewise,” nevertheless he “felt rather encouraged” and reported that the president “is better than his Congress fellows.” Still, though Lincoln seemed a “perfectly honest” magistrate “trying to do what he thought his duty,” Phillips condescendingly deemed him “a man of very slow mind.”²⁵

Garrison did not share Phillips’ enthusiasm. The editor of The Liberator feared the message “will prove a ‘decoy duck’ or ‘a red herring,’ so as to postpone that decisive

²⁴ Moncure D. Conway to his wife Ellen, [Boston], 8 March [1862], Conway Papers, Columbia University.

²⁵ Wendell Phillips’s speech in Boston, 18 April, New York Tribune, 19 April 1862; Phillips to his wife Ann, en route from Milwaukee to Madison, Wisconsin, 31 March 1862, Phillips Papers, Harvard University.

action by Congress which we are desirous of seeing.” Noting that thousands of petitions calling for immediate emancipation were flooding Congress, Garrison asked: “Are these to be satisfied by proposing such a will-of-the-wisp as a substitute?” Lincoln, he charged, “is at war with common sense, sound reason, the teachings of history, the instincts and aspirations of human nature, [and] the laws of political economy.”²⁶ Congressman John F. Potter thought the message “does not amount to much” and remarked: “one swallow don’t make a summer.”²⁷ Maria Weston Chapman regretted the word “gradual” in Lincoln’s message, but she charitably regarded it as “a make-weight, like the word compensation: a couple of sops thrown to the heads of slaveholders. Meanwhile, events are compelling immediatism.”²⁸

Most Radical Republicans, however, agreed with the New York Tribune, which praised “the message of freedom” as “the day-star of a new national dawn” and “one of those few great scriptures that live in history and mark an epoch in the lives of nations and of races.” It was, said the editors, “the most important document ever issued from the White House.” Enthusiastically they predicted that March 6 “will yet be celebrated as a day which initiated the Nation’s deliverance from the most stupendous wrong, curse and shame of the Nineteenth Century.” The president’s “admirable and comprehensive” suggestions would “conduce to National integrity and internal peace.”²⁹ Similarly,

²⁶ Wendell Phillips Garrison et al., William Lloyd Garrison, 1805-1879: The Story of His Life as Told by His Children (4 vols.; New York: Century, 1885-89), 4:49; American Cyclopaedia and Register of Important Events of the Year 1862, 789; The Liberator (Boston), 14 March 1862.

²⁷ Potter, journal entries for 12, 29 March 1862, Potter Papers, Wisconsin State Historical Society.

²⁸ The Liberator (Boston), 14 March 1862.

²⁹ New York Tribune, 7, 8, 11, 24 March 1862.

Charles Sumner thought “it must take its place among the great events of history,”³⁰ and Ralph Waldo Emerson declared that it “marks the happiest day in the political year.”³¹ To a critic of Lincoln’s plan, George William Curtis replied: “I have rather more faith in the President’s common-sense and practical wisdom.” Deeming Lincoln “very wise,” Curtis said that his “policy has been to hold the border states. He has held them. Now he makes his next move, and invites emancipation. I think he has the instinct of a statesman: the knowledge of how much is practicable without recoil. From the first he has steadily advanced – and there has been no protest against anything he has said or done. It is easy to say he has done nothing, – until you compare March 6 ’61 & ’62.”³²

One journalist detected in the president’s message a stern ultimatum: “Mr. Lincoln has at last determined to tend peaceable and friendly emancipation to the slaveholders if they will have it, and forcible emancipation if they will not.” This reporter thought that “Mr. Lincoln has determined to shake off the Kentucky nightmare and be himself again” now that the Border States seemed unlikely to secede. Many believed that the president “has been reserving this shot for the contingency which had now been brought about and that it was his intention from the beginning, after securing so much ground, to put his views of the incompatibility of slavery and freedom into practical operation.”³³ The Chicago Tribune editors calculated that “the Free States are unanimous in adhering to the emancipation idea” and that “the President has struck the key-note with

³⁰ Sumner to an abolitionist friend, Boston, 5 June 1862, Boston Evening Journal, n.d., copied in the New York Tribune, 16 June 1862.

³¹ The Atlantic Monthly, 1862, p. 511.

³² George W. Curtis to Charles Eliot Norton, North Shore, New York, 6 March, 18 June 1862, Curtis Papers, Harvard University.

³³ Washington correspondence, 6 March, Chicago Tribune, 10 March 1862.

which full twenty millions of people will accord.”³⁴ In Massachusetts, the Springfield Republican called the message “a coup d’etat, in fact, displaying much sagacity in its inception, significant in its aim and purpose, and likely to be most important in its effects.”³⁵ An antislavery militant in Connecticut, Elihu Burritt, told Lincoln that the “whole civilized world is honoring you with its sincere homage, as the first of all the list of American Presidents that ever had the moral courage to propose a plan for the extinction of Slavery, so just, generous and noble as to be hailed with admiration in both hemispheres. No earthly potentate ought to aspire to a higher glory than that which this magnanimous overture will forever attach to your name.”³⁶

Moderates joined the chorus of praise.³⁷ Joseph Holt of Kentucky regarded the proposal as “a means of soothing & reassuring the slave states. It is the first explicit declaration by a republican President that this question belongs wholly to the people of the slave states.”³⁸ It “completely squelches the accusation, trumped up for partisan purposes, that the Administration is in favor of emancipation by radical means, and regardless of Constitutional obligations,” declared the Cincinnati Commercial.³⁹ In applauding the message, a resident of Toledo argued that the “time has past for compromise, aggressive measures must be adopted, but mild in character, towards the

³⁴ “Mr. Lincoln’s Message,” Chicago Tribune, 20 March 1862.

³⁵ Springfield, Massachusetts, Republican, 8 March 1862.

³⁶ Elihu Burritt to Lincoln, New Britain, Connecticut, 2 June 1862, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

³⁷ Washington correspondence by R. M. H., 17 March, Indianapolis Journal, 22 March 1862; H. C. Parke to Lincoln, New York, 6 May 1862; H. H. Van Dyck to William H. Seward, Lancaster, Pennsylvania, 9 May 1862, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

³⁸ Holt to David Davis, Washington, 3 May 1863, Davis Papers, Lincoln Presidential Library, Springfield.

³⁹ Cincinnati Commercial, 11 March 1862.

sacred institution.”⁴⁰ The New York World predicted that Lincoln’s message “will attach to our cause in Europe an immense party, and help sustain the efforts of our friends in preventing an intervention in our affairs.”⁴¹ (In fact the message was believed “to be aimed at foreign opinion,” according to Henry W. Bellows, who reported this after dining with Chase, Sumner, John Jay, and William W. Seaton.)⁴² The Providence Journal speculated that the message “will attract more attention in Europe and win for Mr. Lincoln’s administration more commendation than any or all the deeds it has done before.”⁴³

As Owen Lovejoy observed, the message “presented ground where all might stand, the conservative and radical.”⁴⁴ The Democratic Boston Courier, which seldom spoke well of the administration, hailed the message’s “practical benefit toward the great object of restoring the Union.”⁴⁵ The New York Herald thought it “so simple, so just, so profound and comprehensive that we may pronounce it as reaching the final solution and settlement of the most perplexing difficulty in our political system.” It was, said the editors, the “heaviest blow which the rebellion has as yet received.”⁴⁶ Maryland Governor Thomas H. Hicks, a slaveholder, thanked Lincoln for his proposal and lauded its moderation: “The option being left with the States; the offer to provide compensation, when we may be ready to act, is all that any can reasonably ask.” Hicks regarded the

⁴⁰ S. A. Raymond to John Sherman, Toledo, 10 March 1862, John Sherman Papers, Library of Congress.

⁴¹ Washington correspondence, 7 March, New York World, 8 March 1862.

⁴² Henry W. Bellows to his wife, Washington, 6 March 1862, Bellows Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

⁴³ Providence Journal, 8 March 1862.

⁴⁴ More and Moore, eds., Lovejoy Speeches, 320.

⁴⁵ Boston Courier, n.d., copied in the Boston Evening Journal, 11 March 1862.

⁴⁶ New York Herald, 8 March 1862.

message as a blow “aimed as much at the ultraists of the North as at the southern fanatics” and predicted that the “patriotic and Union-loving citizens here and everywhere will stand by you as long as you continue to be conservative; and your honest and successful course in the Past, warrants the belief that the remainder of your Administration will be characterized by a strict adherence to the Constitution.”⁴⁷ Similarly, the Baltimore American remarked that the message dealt “a shrewd blow” to both the abolitionists and “the Cotton Oligarchy,” a blow which would help frustrate Confederate attempts to win support in Europe.⁴⁸ Inside the White House, William O. Stoddard wrote that it “disabled the fanatics by one well directed blow.”⁴⁹ An Ohioan describing himself as “no abolitionist” exclaimed to Senator John Sherman: “Hurrah for Old Abe! I hope you will pass his Resolution, with a will, and get rid of the nigger & save the Constitution.”⁵⁰

The message’s style drew mixed reviews. Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper deemed it “sturdy, clumsy, inelegant and characteristic, having none of the sophomoric touches of Mr. Seward” and lacking “the lowest level of platitude by Edward Bates.”⁵¹ In Cambridge, Charles Eliot Norton called it “an immense move forward in the right direction” but asked rhetorically: “could anything be more feebly put, or more inefficiently written? His style is worse than ever; and though a bad style is not always a

⁴⁷ Thomas H. Hicks to Lincoln, “Appleby,” 18 March 1862, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

⁴⁸ Baltimore American, n.d., copied in the Cincinnati Commercial, 21 March 1862.

⁴⁹ Stoddard to Martin B. Anderson, Washington, 11 March 1862, Martin B. Anderson Papers, University of Rochester.

⁵⁰ J. Dille to John Sherman, Newark, 3 July 1862, John Sherman Papers, Library of Congress.

⁵¹ Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper, 22 March 1862.

mark of bad thought, – it is at least a proof that thought is not as clear as it ought to be.”⁵²

The National Anti-Slavery Standard agreed that the message was “very obscurely written.”⁵³

Some critics raised practical economic questions. The Cincinnati Commercial asked: “Will the people consent to be taxed to the extent required to indemnify the owners of slaves? If they are willing, are they able? Shall the tax be general, or restricted to the free States?”⁵⁴ In southern Pennsylvania, where deep-seated Negrophobia prevailed, especially among workingmen, Republicans balked at the prospect of higher taxes to free slaves.⁵⁵ Indiana Republicans suffered reverses because voters objected to “taxing the people hundreds of millions to pay for negroes to be turned loose to work North at 10 cts a day.”⁵⁶ An attorney in Peoria snorted: “If any states think they would be better off by setting their niggers free let them do it. . . . When our forefathers in the North saw fit to liberate their slaves, they did it without asking or dreaming of asking any compensation. Why should we now voluntarily offer them a reward for doing the same thing?”⁵⁷ Congressional opponents demagogically taunted the administration, saying in effect: “You are exceedingly anxious to take away the property of the Southern people

⁵² Charles Eliot Norton to George Perkins Marsh, Cambridge, Mass., 27 April 1862, Marsh Papers, University of Vermont; Norton to George William Curtis, Cambridge, 8 March 1862, Sara Norton and M. A. De Wolfe Howe, eds., Letters of Charles Eliot Norton (2 vols.; Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1913), 1:252-253.

⁵³ Washington correspondence, 10 March, National Anti-Slavery Standard (New York), 15 March 1862.

⁵⁴ Cincinnati Commercial, 14 March 1862.

⁵⁵ James [Hill?] to Edward McPherson, Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, 14 March 1862, McPherson Papers, Library of Congress.

⁵⁶ Schuyler Colfax to Lincoln, South Bend, Indiana, 18 October 1862, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

⁵⁷ David McCulloch to “Dr. Manning,” Peoria, 12 March 1862, Earnest E. East Papers, Lincoln Presidential Library, Springfield.

and to tax us in order that emancipation may be effective, but we hear nothing from you about protecting the poor white men and women of the free states.”⁵⁸

When the New York Times called the plan too expensive, Lincoln asked its editor, Henry J. Raymond, if he had considered “that less than one half-day's cost of this war would pay for all the slaves in Delaware, at four hundred dollars per head?—that eighty-seven days cost of this war would pay for all in Delaware, Maryland, District of Columbia, Kentucky, and Missouri at the same price? Were those states to take the step, do you doubt that it would shorten the war more than eighty seven days, and thus be an actual saving of expense.”⁵⁹

Raymond, who was serving in the state legislature at Albany, had not written the editorial mentioned by Lincoln. He instructed his newspaper to change its stance. To Lincoln he praised the message as “a master-piece of practical wisdom and sound policy. It is marked by that plain, self-vindicating common-sense which, with the people, overbears, as it ought, all the abstract speculations of mere theorists and confounds, all the schemes of selfish intriguers, – and which, you will permit me to say, has preeminently characterized every act of your Administration. It furnishes a solid, practical, constitutional basis for the treatment of this great question, and suggests the only feasible mode I have yet seen of dealing with a problem infinitely more difficult than the suppression of the rebellion.”⁶⁰

Complying with Raymond’s directive, the Times hailed Lincoln’s message as one whose “words will echo round the globe. They will recover us the respect once felt for us

⁵⁸ Washington correspondence by John W. Forney, 14 March, Philadelphia Press, 15 March 1862.

⁵⁹ Lincoln to Raymond, Washington, 9 March 1862, Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 5:152-53.

⁶⁰ Raymond to Lincoln, Albany, 15 March 1862, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

in the Old World. In dealing with this vexed subject we think he has hit the happy mean upon which all parties in the North and all loyalists in the South can unite.”⁶¹ In England, the Liverpool Post similarly predicted that the message “will have an incalculable effect in Europe, and that effect will be most favorable to the Northern cause,” while the London Star and Dial declared that the message would secure for Lincoln “the warmest sympathy and admiration of the civilized world.”⁶²

Congress’s response, however, disappointed Lincoln. Charles Sumner’s Radical counterpart in the House, Thaddeus Stevens, called the message “about the most diluted, milk-and-water gruel proposition that was ever given to the American nation.”⁶³ (Though Lincoln’s friend William M. Dickson also considered the message a “milk & water” document and “a very tame thing,” he conceded that it was a “good beginning in the right direction” which might “be a warning and in this respect it may be significant.”)⁶⁴ On March 9, the president summoned Frank Blair and complained to him that “[s]ince I sent in my message, about the usual amount of calling by the Border State congressmen has taken place; and although they have all been very friendly not one of them has yet said a word to me about it. Garrett Davis has been here three times since; but although he has been very cordial he has never yet opened his mouth on the subject.” When Lincoln requested that Blair invite those men to the White House for “a frank and direct talk,” the congressman objected “that it might be well to wait until the army did something further.”

⁶¹ “The Recent Message of the President,” New York Times, 8 March 1862.

⁶² Liverpool Post, 20 March, copied in the Chicago Tribune, 5 April 1862; London Star and Dial, n.d., copied in the Philadelphia Press, 13 April 1862.

⁶³ Congressional Globe, 37th Congress, 2nd session, 1154 (10 March 1862).

⁶⁴ W. M. Dickson to Friedrich Hassaurek, Cincinnati, 10 April, 9 June 1862, Hassaurek Papers, Ohio Historical Society.

Lincoln disagreed. “That is just the reason why I do not wish to wait,” he rejoined. “If we should have successes, they may feel and say, the rebellion is crushed and it matters not whether we do anything about this matter. I want them to consider it and interest themselves in it as an auxiliary means for putting down the rebels. I want to tell them that if they will take hold and do this, the war will cease – there will be no further need of keeping standing armies among them, and that they will get rid of all the troubles incident thereto.”⁶⁵

Blair promptly urged Maryland Congressman John W. Crisfield to round up Border State colleagues for a White House meeting. On March 10, Crisfield and a few members of Congress from Missouri and Kentucky gathered at the Executive Mansion, where Lincoln (according to Crisfield) “disclaimed any intent to injure the interests or wound the sensibilities of the slave States.” To the contrary, the president said that “his purpose was to protect the one and respect the other, that we were engaged in a terrible, wasting and tedious war; immense armies were in the field, and must continue in the field as long as the war lasts; that these armies must, of necessity, be brought into contact with slaves in the States we represented, and in other States as they advanced; that slaves would come to the camps, and continual irritation was kept up; that he was constantly annoyed by conflicting and antagonistic complaints; on the one side a certain class complained if the slave was not protected by the army; persons were frequently found, who, participating in these views, acted in a way unfriendly to the slaveholder; on the other hand slaveholders complained that their rights were interfered with, their slaves induced to abscond and [were] protected within the [Union] lines. These complaints were

⁶⁵ Michael Burlingame, ed., With Lincoln in the White House: Letters, Memoranda, and Other Writings of John G. Nicolay, 1860-1865 (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2000), 73.

numerous, loud and deep; were a serious annoyance to him and embarrassing to the progress of the war; that it kept alive a spirit hostile to the government in the States we represented; strengthened the hopes of the Confederates that at some day the border States would unite with them, and thus tend to prolong the war, and he was of the opinion, if this resolution should be adopted by Congress and accepted by our States, these causes of irritation and these hopes would be removed, and more would be accomplished towards shortening the war than could be hoped from the greatest victory achieved by Union armies; that he made this proposition in good faith, and desired it to be accepted, if at all, voluntarily and in the same patriotic spirit in which it was made; that emancipation was a subject exclusively under the control of the States, and must be adopted or rejected by each for itself, that he did not claim nor had this government any right to coerce them for that purpose; that such was no part of his purpose in making this proposition, and he wished it to be clearly understood that he did not expect us there to be prepared to give him answer, but he hoped we would take the subject into serious consideration, confer with one another, and then take such course as we felt our duty and the interest of our constituents required of us.”

When a Missouri congressman complained that Lincoln’s proposal was interpreted by the New York Tribune “to mean that we must accept gradual emancipation according to the plan suggested, or get something worse,” he replied that “he must not be expected to quarrel with the New York Tribune before the right time; he hoped never to have to do it.” To Crisfield, who asked what would happen if the Border States rejected the plan, Lincoln said “that he had no designs beyond the action of the States on this particular subject. He should lament their refusal to accept it, but he had no designs

beyond their refusal of it.” Crisfield added that his constituents felt the administration was coercing them indirectly. Lincoln replied that as long as he remained president “Maryland had nothing to fear, either for her institutions or her interests, on the points referred to.” The congressman asked permission to make this pledge public, but Lincoln demurred, saying “it would force me into a quarrel before the proper time.”

To constitutional questions raised by Charles Wickliffe of Kentucky, whom Lincoln described as a “secessionist,” the president said: “I have considered that, and the proposition now submitted does not encounter any constitutional difficulty. It proposes simply to co-operate with any State, by giving such State pecuniary aid and he thought that the resolution, as proposed by him, would be considered rather as the expression of a sentiment than as involving any constitutional question.”

Queried about his own attitude toward slavery, Lincoln “said he did not pretend to disguise his anti-slavery feeling; that he thought it was wrong, and should continue to think so; but that was not the question we had to deal with now. Slavery existed, and that, too, as well by the act of the North as of the South, and in any scheme to get rid of it the North as well as the South was morally bound to do its full and equal share. He thought the institution wrong, and ought never to have existed, but yet he recognized the rights of property which had grown out of it, and would respect those rights as fully as similar rights in any other property; that property can exist and does legally exist. He thought such a law wrong, but the rights of property resulting must be respected; he would get rid

of the odious law, not by violating the right, but by encouraging the proposition [made on March 6] and offering inducements to give it up.”⁶⁶

Lincoln also appealed to other members of Congress, including California Senator James A. McDougall, who objected to the program’s expense. The president replied with an argument like the one he had made to Henry J. Raymond. To illustrate the practicality of his plan, he suggested a possible example of how it might be financed: “Suppose, for instance a State devises and adopts a system by which the institution absolutely ceases therein by a named day – say January 1st 1882. Then let the sum to be paid to such State by the United States be ascertained by taking from the census of 1860 the number of slaves within the State, and multiplying that number by four hundred, – the United States to pay such sum to the State in twenty equal annual install[*I*]ments, in six per cent bonds of the United States. The sum thus given, as to time and manner, I think would not be half as onerous, as would be an equal sum raised now, for the indefinite prosecution of the war.”⁶⁷

Lincoln was somewhat pessimistic about his plan’s chances for success. To Carl Schurz he explained that he “was not altogether without hope” that it would be accepted by at least some of the Border States. If they all rejected it, then “theirs was the responsibility.”⁶⁸

As Lincoln feared, the Border State delegations found his arguments unpersuasive. They balked at the meager sum to be paid for slaves, raised constitutional

⁶⁶ Memo by Crisfield, 10 March 1862, Louisville Democrat, 26 October 1862, copied in the New York Herald, 31 October 1862; Adams S. Hill to Sydney Howard Gay, [Washington], n.d., Gay Papers, Columbia University.

⁶⁷ Lincoln to James A. McDougall, Washington, 14 March 1862, Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 5:160-61.

⁶⁸ Schurz, Reminiscences, 2:328-29.

objections, predicted that a race war would ensue, warned that Lincoln's scheme would cause taxes to rise dramatically, protested that their economies would be ruined, and feared that if adopted, it would make life harder for Unionists in Virginia and Tennessee. (A Missouri Unionist regretted that Lincoln, whom he regarded as "a good & honest man," had become "a monomaniac" on the slavery issue.)⁶⁹ On March 11, D. W. Bartlett, after observing the congressional debates in which these objections were made, remarked that it "is certainly astonishing with what tenacity the border state men cling" to slavery. Prophetically he speculated that the "whole scheme will prove a failure, for no border state unless it be Delaware will accept the offer."⁷⁰ John W. Forney found their opposition "inexplicable," for they failed to "see that, while the ultra Republicans swallowed the President's theory with reluctance, the sentiment which actuated it was a sentiment of devoted attachment" to the Border State men.⁷¹ George D. Prentice, editor of the Louisville Journal, warned that Border State intransigence would drive Lincoln into the arms of the Radicals.⁷²

On March 12, the Border State delegations held a caucus at which they angrily rejected emancipation, "whether coated with sugar or gunpowder."⁷³ The efforts of Congressmen George Fisher of Delaware, Horace Maynard of Tennessee, Samuel L. Casey of Kentucky, and John W. Noell of Missouri, proved unavailing. Disgustedly Fisher reported that most Border State colleagues opposed the liberation of any slaves at

⁶⁹ Hugh Campbell to Joseph Holt, Philadelphia, 24 July 1862, Holt Papers, Library of Congress.

⁷⁰ Washington correspondence by Van [D. W. Bartlett], 11 March, Springfield (Massachusetts) Republican, 15 March 1862.

⁷¹ Washington correspondence by Forney, 12 March, Philadelphia Press, 13 March 1862.

⁷² Louisville Journal, n.d., copied in the Indianapolis Journal, 10 July 1862.

⁷³ Washington correspondence, 12 March, Chicago Tribune, 15 March 1862.

all. The pro-slavery congressmen proved more deeply committed, more earnest, more energetic, and more determined than Fisher and his few allies. (Simultaneously, a Kentucky lawmaker moved to suspend the rules of the state legislature in order to move that any advocate of emancipation in the commonwealth, or any sympathizer with abolition, be “disfranchised for life.” The motion to suspend, supported by forty-eight legislators and opposed by twenty-nine, failed because it did not win the necessary two-thirds of the vote.)⁷⁴ Congress nevertheless passed Lincoln’s resolution by wide margins: 88-31 in the House and 32-10 in the senate.⁷⁵

Lincoln thanked Horace Greeley for his paper’s approval of his emancipation plan and suggested that “as the North are already for the measure, we should urge it persuasively, and not menacingly, upon the South.” The place to start might well be Washington. There slavery could be abolished legally, for the federal government controlled the District of Columbia. Lincoln, however, told Greeley: “I am a little uneasy about the abolishment of slavery in this District, not but I would be glad to see it abolished, but as to the time and manner of doing it. If some one or more of the border-states would move fast, I should greatly prefer it; but if this can not be in a reasonable time, I would like the bill [abolishing slavery in the District] to have the three main features – gradual – compensation – and vote of the people – I do not talk to members of congress on the subject, except when they ask me.”⁷⁶ Greeley offered to endorse emancipation in the District with Lincoln’s provisos.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ New York Tribune, 24 March 1862.

⁷⁵ New York Herald, 4 April 1862.

⁷⁶ Lincoln to Greeley, Washington, 24 March 1862, Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 5:169.

⁷⁷ Greeley to Lincoln, New York, 24 March 1862, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

Some congressmen and senators favored a more radical approach than the president's, for constituents were pressing them to rid the capital of slavery on both moral and pragmatic grounds. Former Representative Jacob Brinkerhoff of Ohio optimistically predicted that if the emancipation bill passed, "Washington will soon become a northern city, and a radiating center for the dissemination of northern ideas."⁷⁸ In December 1861, Massachusetts Senator Henry Wilson had introduced a bill abolishing slavery in the District immediately and providing compensation for slave owners. Four months later, the lawmakers heatedly debated the measure, adding a provision for voluntary colonization to be funded by Congress.⁷⁹

Maryland Unionists denounced the statute as "an act of bad faith on the part of Congress toward our State."⁸⁰ The state's former governor and future senator Thomas H. Hicks opposed the bill.⁸¹ When Maryland Congressman John A. Crisfield called at the White House to protest against the legislation, Lincoln "said he greatly objected to the time, and terms of the bill, and saw the trouble it would cause, and would gladly have avoided any action upon it," but "he also saw the troubles to arise on its rejection." He "could not say it was unconstitutional, and he had come to the conclusion, after full consideration of all the pros & cons, that he would do less mischief by approving than by rejecting it; and he hoped that the people of Maryland, would see the difficulties of his

⁷⁸ Jacob Brinkerhoff to John Sherman, Columbus, 23 February 1862, John Sherman Papers, Library of Congress.

⁷⁹ Michael J. Katz, "Emancipation in the Federal City," Civil War History, 24 (1978): 250-267; Henry Wilson, History of the Rise and Fall of the Slave Power in America (3 vols.; Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1872), 2:270-84.

⁸⁰ Baltimore American, n.d., copied in the Chicago Times, 18 April 1862.

⁸¹ Hicks to Lincoln, Appleby, 26 May 1862, Hicks Papers, Maryland Historical Society.

position, and treat him with forbearance.” Crisfield told his wife that he was “really sympathetic” with the president, “surrounded with immense difficulties” as he was.⁸²

After the bill was adopted, Lincoln expressed to Orville H. Browning his regret that it “had been passed in its present form – that it should have been for gradual emancipation – that now families would at once be deprived of cooks, stable boys &c and they of their protectors without any provision for them.” He delayed signing the bill in order to allow pro-slavery Kentucky Congressman Charles Wickliffe time to remove two sick slaves who, in the president’s view, “would not be benefited by freedom.”⁸³

Lincoln’s March 6 message recommending compensated emancipation helped pave the way for the bill’s passage. Four days after that bombshell document exploded at the Capitol, the National Anti-Slavery Standard reported that “several members who before it was delivered were on the fence have since leaped headlong over on the emancipation side.” The “hint at the close of his message, that a time may come when a decree of emancipation must be made, has worked wonders in Congress. Men who, a week ago, looked with horror upon any proposition to touch slavery in any manner, begin to shift position.” Such men “are the suitors for Executive favor – men who must be with the Administration, and sleep under the wing of the Executive, or die.”⁸⁴

On April 16, Lincoln signed the legislation and simultaneously explained to the lawmakers his concerns: “I have never doubted the constitutional authority of congress to abolish slavery in this District; and I have ever desired to see the national capital freed from the institution in some satisfactory way. Hence there has never been, in my mind,

⁸² Crisfield to his wife, Washington, 25 April 1862, Crisfield Papers, Maryland Historical Society.

⁸³ Pease and Randall, eds., Browning Diary, 1:541 (entry for 14 April 1862).

⁸⁴ Washington correspondence, 10 March, National Anti-Slavery Standard (New York), 15 March 1862.

any question upon the subject, except the one of expediency, arising in view of all the circumstances. If there be matters within and about this act, which might have taken a course or shape, more satisfactory to my jud[g]ment, I do not attempt to specify them. I am gratified that the two principles of compensation, and colonization, are both recognized, and practically applied in the act.”⁸⁵ Unlike the legislation he had framed in 1849 abolishing slavery in the District, this statute did not allow the District’s voters to express their views, nor did it make emancipation gradual.⁸⁶ Referring to his earlier bill, he told a friend: “Little did I dream in 1849, when . . . I proposed to abolish slavery at this capital, and could scarcely get a hearing for the proposition, that it would be so soon accomplished.”⁸⁷ In his 1858 debates with Stephen A. Douglas, Lincoln declared that he “would be exceedingly glad to see Congress abolish slavery in the District of Columbia, and, in the language of Henry Clay, ‘sweep from our Capital that foul blot upon our nation.’”⁸⁸

Washington blacks were jubilant, especially those who had been hiding out for days, fearing that their owners might remove them from the District in anticipation of Lincoln’s action.⁸⁹ At Cooper Union, the preacher-colonizationist Henry Highland Garnet proposed to a group of fellow blacks who were celebrating the statute that they give “three cheers

⁸⁵ Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 5:192.

⁸⁶ The bill that passed was written by Judge Thomas M. Key of Cincinnati, then serving as a colonel in the Army of the Potomac. Chase to Key, Washington, 18 April 1862, telegram in Chase Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

⁸⁷ Francis F. Browne, The Every-Day Life of Abraham Lincoln, (2nd ed.; Chicago: Browne & Howell, 1913), 421.

⁸⁸ Speech at Freeport, Illinois, 27 August 1858, Basler, Collected Works of Lincoln, 3:41-42. As he had done earlier, Lincoln said abolition in the capital should be accomplished gradually, with compensation for the slave owners, and only if the voters of the District approved.

⁸⁹ Washington correspondence, 16 April, New York Times, 17 April 1862; Washington correspondence, 16 April, Chicago Times, 22 April 1862.

for the Union, the President, and old John Brown.”⁹⁰ Alluding to Proverbs 14:34, Frederick Douglass hailed the new law as “that first great step towards that righteousness which exalts a nation.” The New York Anglo-African said “Americans abroad can now hold up their heads when interrogated as to what the Federal Government is fighting for, and answer, ‘There, look at our capital and see what we have fought for.’” The president’s action “marks the grandest revolution of the ages, a revolution from barbarism to civilization” and among blacks won for him a “confidence and admiration . . . such as no man has enjoyed in the present era.”⁹¹

White abolitionists loudly sang the law’s praises. Henry Ward Beecher declared that it “is worth living for a lifetime to see the capital of our government redeemed from the stigma and shame of being a slave mart We have found by experience that though Abraham Lincoln is sure, he is slow; and that though he is slow, he is sure!”⁹² Lydia Maria Child thought “it is some thing to get slavery abolished in ten miles square, after thirty years of arguing, remonstrating, and petitioning,” although the amount of territory liberated was “not much.” She predicted that the “effect it will produce is of more importance than the act itself.” As for the president, she was “inclined to think that ‘old Abe’ means about right, only he has a hide-bound soul.”⁹³ Even the National Anti-Slavery Standard, which freely admitted that it had “not been overswift” to “acknowledge

⁹⁰ Martin B. Pasternak, Rise Now and Fly to Arms: The Life of Henry Highland Garnet (New York: Garland, 1995), 105.

⁹¹ James M. McPherson, ed., The Negro’s Civil War: How American Negroes Felt and Acted during the War for the Union (New York: Pantheon Books, 1965), 45; Weekly Anglo African (New York), 22 March 1862.

⁹² Beecher, Freedom and War: Discourses on Topics Suggested by the Times (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1863), 264.

⁹³ Child to Robert Wallcut, Wayland, Massachusetts, 20 April 1862, Garrison Papers, Boston Public Library; Child to Lucy Osgood, Wayland, Massachusetts, 20 April 1862, Child Letters, ed. Meltzer and Holland, 410.

the sagacity of the President,” now said he “has shown himself a resolute and a wise man” with his “face set Zionward and a disposition to press forward in that direction.”⁹⁴

Most Radicals thought that Lincoln’s approval of the bill represented “the turning-point in the policy of the Administration upon the slavery question.”⁹⁵ Indiana Congressman George W. Julian rejoiced that the “current is setting in the right direction.”⁹⁶ Passage of the bill, said Charles Eliot Norton, “has a significance far deeper than is contained in the mere fact of freeing a few thousand negroes. The first step toward general freedom has been taken, and certainly in this case it is le premier pas qui coute.”⁹⁷

Some Radicals were less enthusiastic, believing that “the butter is spread on rather thin.”⁹⁸ The eccentric Parker Pillsbury, whose “fretful, narrow spirit” disturbed fellow abolitionists, “said he dreaded to give way to any rejoicing, for he had noticed that any good thing in the Government was quite sure to be followed by some extraordinary baseness!”⁹⁹ Illinois Congressman Owen Lovejoy, a self-described “old and ultra abolitionist,” demurred. With an apt image, he defended Lincoln as an “Executive rail-splitter” who “understands his business.” The president knew full well “that the thin end of the wedge must first enter the wood.” By signing the emancipation bill, he had “taken the Abolition wedge, and struck it into the log of Slavery and now the heavy mall of Abolition must let the blows fall till it is driven to the head, and the log riven in twain.”

⁹⁴ National Anti-Slavery Standard (New York), 26 April 1862.

⁹⁵ Washington correspondence, 7 April, National Anti-Slavery Standard (New York), 12 April 1862.

⁹⁶ Julian to William Lloyd Garrison, Washington, 16 April 1862, Garrison Papers, Boston Public Library.

⁹⁷ Charles Eliot Norton to George Perkins Marsh, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 27 April 1862, Marsh Papers, University of Vermont.

⁹⁸ Edward Magdol, Owen Lovejoy, Abolitionist in Congress (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1967), 324; More and Moore, eds., Lovejoy Speeches, 345.

⁹⁹ Harriet Martineau, National Anti-Slavery Standard (New York), 24 March 1859; Samuel May Jr. to Elizabeth Buffum Chace, 22 April 1862, in Lillie Buffam Wyman, Elizabeth Buffam Chace (2 vols.; Boston: W. B. Clarke, 1914), 1:236.

But, Lovejoy cautioned, “in very ugly and cross-grained, or frozen wood, the blows have to be a little easy at first, or the wedge flies out.” Echoing Lincoln’s belief, the congressman added that it was “not worthwhile to strike so hard as to have a rebound, for that would retard the work in the long run.”¹⁰⁰

Midwestern Republicans hailed the new law joyfully.¹⁰¹ “The world does move!” exclaimed a happy Ohioan. “Congress has begun in the right place.”¹⁰² People in western Illinois felt “like shouting glory” to celebrate the news “that we have at last got a clean nest for the American Eagle.” One of them praised Lincoln for having “the discretion of Washington & the firmness of Andrew Jackson.” Initially “we thought the pro Slavery influence about him would kill him – now we perceive his wisdom in making haste slowly.”¹⁰³

Even the London Times, which generally took a dim view of the Lincoln administration, praised the law extravagantly. “The Thunderer” predicted that April 16, 1862, would “stand in American history as the greatest day since that of signing the Declaration of Independence – the day of this century which will be honored through all time.”¹⁰⁴ With similar hyperbole, Wall Street lawyer George Templeton Strong asked rhetorically: “Has any President, since this country came into being, done so weighty an

¹⁰⁰ Magdol, Lovejoy, 324; More and Moore, eds., Lovejoy Speeches, 345.

¹⁰¹ Sherman Blocker to John Sherman, Wadsworth, Ohio, 23 April 1862, John Sherman Papers, Library of Congress.

¹⁰² F. D. Parish to John Sherman, Sandusky, 18 April 1862, John Sherman Papers, Library of Congress.

¹⁰³ G. O. Pond to Lyman Trumbull, Griggsville, Illinois, 14 April 1862, Lyman Trumbull Papers, Library of Congress.

¹⁰⁴ Quoted in More and Moore, eds., Lovejoy Speeches, 344.

act?” Strong rejoiced that the “federal government is now clear of all connection with slaveholding.”¹⁰⁵

Conservatives in Congress, however, were gravely disappointed.¹⁰⁶ Democrats sneered that the “inevitable consequence must be a very great influx of fugitive negroes, and drain on the pockets of the philanthropic, besides calling for government assistance.”¹⁰⁷ The Chicago Times predicted that the bill, along with Lincoln’s compensated emancipation scheme, “will prolong the rebellion” and “make eventual adjustment a thousand times more difficult.”¹⁰⁸ The Washington correspondent of that paper, the Chicago Times, remarked: “Negrophobia has seized the entire party of the Administration; they have nigger on the brain, nigger in the bowels, nigger in the eyes, nigger, nigger, everywhere.”¹⁰⁹

When advised that the Maryland congressional delegation would protest that their constituents’ slaves might escape to Washington, Lincoln remarked: “Well, I shall say to them, ‘I am engaged in putting down a great rebellion, in which I can only succeed by the help of the North, which will not tolerate my returning your slaves, and I cannot try experiments. You cannot have them.’”¹¹⁰ In fact, masters did complain to Maryland Governor Augustus W. Bradford about slaves fleeing to the capital. In May, the governor

¹⁰⁵ Nevins and Thomas, eds., Strong Diary, 3:217 (16 April 1862).

¹⁰⁶ Washington correspondence, 16 April, New York Herald, 17 April 1862.

¹⁰⁷ Washington correspondence, 17 April, New York Evening Express, 18 April 1862.

¹⁰⁸ Chicago Times, 8 April 1862.

¹⁰⁹ Chicago Times, n.d., quoted in the Baltimore Republican, 21 May 1862.

¹¹⁰ Lincoln told this to Carl Schurz, who in turn told it to George W. Smalley. Smalley to Sydney Howard Gay, Strasburg [Virginia], 21 June 1862, Gay Papers, Columbia University.

called on Lincoln, who was busy, but from Congressman Crisfield he learned that Marshal Ward Hill Lamon was helping render fugitives back to their owners.¹¹¹

Lincoln appointed Daniel R. Goodloe, Horatio King, and Samuel F. Vinton as commissioners to appraise the monetary value of each slave who would be liberated. He explained to them “that he had chosen Mr Goodloe as representing the ‘black Republican’ party, Mr Vinton, his old Whig party, and Mr King the democratic party.”¹¹² When some Republican senators objected to King, who had served in Buchanan’s cabinet, the president met with them at the capitol on April 26. Soon thereafter King and the others were confirmed, and over the next few months they authorized compensation for 2,989 slaves.¹¹³

ONE STEP BACKWARD: REVOKING HUNTER’S ABOLITION DECREE

While he was willing to sign what he regarded as an imperfect emancipation measure for the District, Lincoln would not condone formal emancipation by military commanders in the field. Just as he had overruled Frémont’s proclamation in September, 1861, so too he struck down General David Hunter’s similar decree in the spring of 1862. On May 9, Hunter, in charge of the Department of the South (consisting primarily of the Sea Islands off the coast of Georgia, Florida, and South Carolina), cited military necessity as a justification for liberating slaves there. Two days later he pressed hundreds of them into military service and gave them weapons, prompting Border State delegations to

¹¹¹ Bradford to William D. Bowie, Annapolis, 19 May 1862, Bradford Papers, Maryland Historical Society.

¹¹² Horatio King to James Buchanan, Washington, 27 April 1862, draft, King Papers, Library of Congress. Lincoln made this statement on April 26. King replaced James G. Berret, who declined the appointment.

¹¹³ Washington correspondence, 23 April, New York Times, 24 April 1862; Washington correspondence, n.d., Chicago Times, 28 April 1862.

demand that Hunter be repudiated.¹¹⁴ From the North, Lincoln received heated protests, including one from a New Yorker, Peter Sturdevant, who warned that if “General Hunter's proclamation declairing the slaves of his department forever free, is not disowned by the administration and himself disgraced, I will place my whole property to the value of three millions in the hands of the rebels for the use of the traitor Jeff Davis and his base ends[.] This act has done us more harm than a loss of two battles and has made Kentucky & Maryland almost against us if not wholly.”¹¹⁵ Reverdy Johnson of Maryland pleaded with Lincoln for swift revocation of Hunter’s act: “For Heaven[’]s sake, at once, repudiate it, & recall the officer. The reason he assigns to it is as absurd, as the inexpediency, is glaring. Unless promptly corrected, it will serve the rebels, nicer than a dozen victories. Devoted, as I hope you know, to the Union, I look on the policy thus inaugurated, if to be followed, as fatal to all our hopes. As far as I am able to collect opinion here, there is but one sentiment – disapprobation – & all, are looking with confident hope, to your arresting the treason at once.”¹¹⁶ Another Marylander, the former congressman and future Radical bête noire of the Lincoln administration, Henry Winter Davis, called Hunter’s proclamation “an outrage,” “unmilitary, unrepublican & insubordinate & wholly incapable of giving liberty in fact to a single slave who could not himself take it. A proclamation of emancipation over three States by a commander who hangs on by his fingernails to the coast under cover of . . . gun boats is a little

¹¹⁴ Washington correspondence, 18 May, New York Evening Post, 19 May 1862; Washington correspondence, 16 May, New York Tribune, 17 May 1862.

¹¹⁵ Peter Sturdevant to Lincoln, New York, 16 May 1862, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

¹¹⁶ Reverdy Johnson to Lincoln, New York, 16 May 1862, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

ludicrous!!”¹¹⁷ Davis considered Lincoln’s action “the best disposition that could be made” and hoped that Hunter would be cashiered.¹¹⁸ (Lincoln did not fire or censure Hunter, nor did he order him to dismiss his black soldiers.) A Philadelphian recommended that Lincoln should turn the tables on proclamation-prone generals by forbidding the issuance of any such documents contradicting administration policy.¹¹⁹ The president may well have been tempted to do so, for he exclaimed in frustration: “No matter what I do – I am troubled every day with the rash and unexpected acts of my officers!”¹²⁰

Some Republicans argued that Hunter was acting within the scope of his authority as a department commander; that the slaves freed by his order could not in good conscience be re-enslaved; and that the order would eliminate all possibility that European powers would intervene on behalf of the Confederacy.¹²¹ Chase counseled Lincoln to support Hunter, alleging that it was “of the highest importance, whether our relations at home or abroad be considered, that this order be not revoked. . . . It will be cordially approved, I assume, by more than nine tenths of the people on whom you must rely for support of your Administration.”¹²² The president, who “expressed great indignation” at Hunter’s action, curtly replied: “No commanding general shall do such a

¹¹⁷ Henry Winter Davis to Samuel Francis Du Pont, [Baltimore], [no day indicated] July 1862, transcript, S. F. Du Pont Papers, Hagley Museum, Wilmington, Delaware.

¹¹⁸ Henry Winter Davis to Sophie Du Pont, Louviers [near Wilmington], 2 September 1862, and [Baltimore], 20 May 1862, transcript, S. F. Du Pont Papers, Hagley Museum, Wilmington, Delaware.

¹¹⁹ William C. Logan to Edward McPherson, Philadelphia, 16 May 1862, McPherson Papers, Library of Congress.

¹²⁰ Washington correspondence, 9 June, National Anti-Slavery Standard (New York), 14 June 1862.

¹²¹ Washington correspondence, 18 May, New York Tribune, 19 May 1862.

¹²² Salmon P. Chase to Lincoln, Washington, 16 May 1862, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

thing, upon my responsibility, without consulting me.”¹²³ He explained that Hunter “was specially enjoined not to meddle with matters political” and had been forbidden to issue proclamations.¹²⁴ Though Stanton approved of Hunter’s act, he deplored his lack of discretion: “Damn him, why didn’t he do it and say nothing about it.”¹²⁵ Similarly, Lincoln remarked that he wished the general “to do it, not say it.”¹²⁶

At first, Lincoln hesitated to overrule Hunter, lest European powers conclude that the North was simply waging a war of conquest which civilized nations might feel compelled to halt by intervening.¹²⁷ But on May 19, he formally revoked Hunter’s order, surprising many Republican allies.¹²⁸ He averred that “the government of the United States, had no knowledge, information, or belief, of an intention on the part of General Hunter to issue such a proclamation,” adding that “neither General Hunter, nor any other commander, or person, has been authorized by the Government of the United States, to make proclamations declaring the slaves of any State free; and that the supposed proclamation, now in question, whether genuine or false, is altogether void, so far as respects such declaration.”

Having taken away with one hand, Lincoln then gave with the other. Portentously he hinted that soon he might issue a proclamation like Hunter’s: “I further make known

¹²³ Washington correspondence, 16, 18 May, New York Herald, 17, 19 May 1862; Lincoln to Chase, Washington, [17 May 1862], Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 5:219.

¹²⁴ Washington correspondence, 16 May, Cincinnati Commercial, 17 May 1862; Washington correspondence, 17 May, New York Times, 18 May 1862.

¹²⁵ Edward Atkinson to “Dear Ned,” Boston, 10 June 1862, Atkinson Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

¹²⁶ George W. Smalley to Sydney Howard Gay, Strasburg [Virginia], 21 June 1862, Gay Papers, Columbia University.

¹²⁷ Washington correspondence by Van [D. W. Bartlett], 21 May, Springfield (Massachusetts) Republican, 24 May 1862.

¹²⁸ Washington correspondence, 20 May, New York Evening Post, 21 May 1862; Washington correspondence by Van [D. W. Bartlett], 21 May, Springfield (Massachusetts) Republican, 24 May 1862.

that whether it be competent for me, as Commander-in-Chief of the Army and Navy, to declare the Slaves of any state or states, free, and whether at any time, in any case, it shall have become a necessity indispensable to the maintenance of the government, to exercise such supposed power, are questions which, under my responsibility, I reserve to myself, and which I can not feel justified in leaving to the decision of commanders in the field. These are totally different questions from those of police regulations in armies and camps.”

When a friend reminded the president that he had allowed Halleck’s notorious order of the previous November (forbidding slaves to enter Union lines) to stand, Lincoln replied: “D—n General order No 3.”¹²⁹

Lincoln used the occasion to warn Border State senators and congressmen that they should approve the compensated emancipation plan he had submitted to Congress two months earlier. In his proclamation revoking Hunter’s order, he issued an earnest appeal: “I do not argue. I beseech you to make the arguments for yourselves. You can not if you would, be blind to the signs of the times. I beg of you a calm and enlarged consideration of them, ranging, if it may be, far above personal and partizan politics. This proposal makes common cause for a common object, casting no reproaches upon any. It acts not the pharisee. The change it contemplates would come gently as the dews of heaven, not rending or wrecking anything. Will you not embrace it? So much good has not been done, by one effort, in all past time, as, in the providence of God, it is now your

¹²⁹ Adams S. Hill to Sydney Howard Gay, [Washington, 20 May 1862], Sydney Howard Gay Papers, Columbia University.

high privilege to do. May the vast future not have to lament that you have neglected it.”¹³⁰

The appeal fell on deaf ears.

Lincoln’s revocation of Hunter’s proclamation pleased Moderates like Governor Israel Washburn of Maine, who maintained that the general’s “act was in fact unauthorized” and therefore “the President could say no less.” Washburn believed that “it is wise that the power should be exercised by him [Lincoln] alone.”¹³¹ To a general who congratulated him on his decision, the president remarked: “I am trying to do my duty, but no one can imagine what influences are brought to bear on me.”¹³²

An Ohioan accurately noted that the “people are not yet prepared for Hunter’s conclusion.” In time, public opinion would change, he accurately predicted, for the “logic of the war is doing its work slowly but surely.”¹³³ The leading Republican paper in Rhode Island found Lincoln’s proclamation revoking Hunter’s order “admirable in letter and spirit,”¹³⁴ and Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper lauded the document as characteristically Lincolnian, “rugged, direct, simple and earnest . . . pervaded by a spirit sympathetic and paternal.” Also paternal was the appeal to the Border State delegation, which resembled an appeal “a father might make to his children.” The editors were glad that the president had apparently not allowed Seward “to make revisions, and

¹³⁰ Proclamation 19 May 1862, Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 5:222-23.

¹³¹ Israel Washburn to Hannibal Hamlin, Augusta, 23 May 1862, Israel Washburn Papers, Library of Congress.

¹³² George Meade, Meade The Life and Letters of George Gordon Meade (2 vols.; New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1913), 1:267.

¹³³ J. Dille to John Sherman, Newark, Ohio, 24 May 1862, John Sherman Papers Library of Congress.

¹³⁴ Providence Journal, 21 May 1862.

bedizen honest, earnest thoughts with a tawdry rhetoric.”¹³⁵ A prominent New York merchant, Alexander T. Stewart, urged Lincoln to continue “your policy of maintaining the Constitution. It is our only rock of safety. A grateful Country will in return give you its approval, and its increased confidence and love.”¹³⁶ The conservative New York Herald called Lincoln’s proclamation “opportune and admirable,” the “most important State paper issued since the outbreak of the rebellion.” The editors thought that it “gives another example of the unflinching conservativeness of Mr. Lincoln, while it widens and deepens, if possible, the impassable gulf between him and the baffled revolutionary nigger-worshipping radicals.”¹³⁷

Those Radicals were intensely disgruntled.¹³⁸ “A more injudicious and unjust edict has not been issued since the war began,” Joseph Medill expostulated to Chase.¹³⁹ The treasury secretary was equally upset, telling Horace Greeley: “I have not been so sorely tried by anything here.”¹⁴⁰ Adam Gurowski thought Hunter’s decree “was too noble, too great for the tall Kentuckian. Henceforth every Northern man dying in the South is to be credited to Mr. Lincoln.”¹⁴¹ Lydia Maria Child warned that the nation “will have to pass through shameful stages of degenerance if we blindly and recklessly throw away the glorious opportunity for atonement which the Divine Ruler has placed within

¹³⁵ Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper, 7 June 1862.

¹³⁶ Alexander T. Stewart to Lincoln, New York, 21 May 1862, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

¹³⁷ New York Herald, 20, 21 May 1862.

¹³⁸ Hans L. Trefousse, The Radical Republicans: Lincoln’s Vanguard for Racial Justice (New York: Knopf, 1969), 218.

¹³⁹ Medill to Chase, Chicago, 30 May 1862, Niven, ed., Chase Papers, 3:207.

¹⁴⁰ Chase to Greeley, Washington, 23 May 1862, Niven, ed., Chase Papers, 3:203.

¹⁴¹ Gurowski, Diary (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1863), 219 (entry for May 1862).

our reach.”¹⁴² Another Massachusetts abolitionist, William Lloyd Garrison, predicted that Lincoln’s act “will serve to increase the disgust and uneasiness felt in Europe at our shilly-shallying course, to abate the enthusiasm of the army and friends of freedom universally, and to inspire the rebels with fresh courage and determination.” To Garrison, the future seemed “pregnant with sorrow and disaster.”¹⁴³ Radical clergy denounced the president’s “short-sighted” and “unreasonable” act “of overweening caution & timidity” as “an insult to the country,” a “disgrace to himself and to the government,” a “crime against humanity and God.”¹⁴⁴ Moncure Conway hyperbolically declared that Lincoln “cannot annul the order of Gen. Hunter without being pilloried in history as the man who reenslaved nearly a million human beings.”¹⁴⁵ In the House of Representatives, Thaddeus Stevens declared that Lincoln “is as honest a man as there is in the world, but I believe him too easy and amiable, and to be misled by the malign influence of Kentucky counselors.”¹⁴⁶ Privately, Stevens expressed himself more harshly, telling a friend: “As to future hopes, they are poor as Lincoln is nobody.”¹⁴⁷ Even the sympathetic journalist D. W. Bartlett was chagrined. He wished that “Lincoln had a little more energy,” for he seemed “too easy, story-telling, unmoved.”¹⁴⁸ A disappointed black abolitionist, who had

¹⁴² Lydia Maria Child to Jessie Fremont, n.d., The Liberator (Boston), 11 October 1862.

¹⁴³ Garrison to Charles B. Sedgwick, Boston, 20 May 1862, in Walter M. Merrill, ed., The Letters of William Lloyd Garrison (6 vols.; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971-81), 5:93.

¹⁴⁴ Samuel J. May, Jr., to Richard Webb, Boston, 27 May 1862, May Papers, Boston Public Library; George B. Cheever in the New York Herald, 22 May 1862.

¹⁴⁵ Conway in Howard, Religion and the Radical Republican Movement, 1860-1870 (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1986), 28.

¹⁴⁶ Congressional Globe, 37th Congress, 2nd session, 3125 (5 July 1862).

¹⁴⁷ Thaddeus Stevens to Dr. Joseph Gibbons, n.p., 17 April 1862, photocopy, Schoff Collection, Clements Library, University of Michigan.

¹⁴⁸ Washington correspondence by Van [D. W. Bartlett], 8 July, Springfield (Massachusetts) Republican, 11 July 1862.

been heartened by the president’s “confiscation messages, his emancipation recommendations and other liberal actions,” denounced him for overruling Hunter with a “Pro-slavery Proclamation.”¹⁴⁹

Massachusetts Governor John A. Andrew hinted that if the administration failed to support Hunter, the Bay State would not gladly provide troops for the army. In response to an appeal for reinforcements, Andrew told Secretary of War Stanton that “if the President will sustain General Hunter, recognize all men, even black men, as legally capable of that loyalty the blacks are waiting to manifest, and let them fight, with God and human nature on their side, the roads will swarm if need be with multitudes whom New England would pour out to obey your call.”¹⁵⁰

Not all Radicals were so condemnatory. From South Carolina, Edward Lillie Pierce reluctantly criticized General Hunter, whose antislavery zeal he shared. “I think there may be some irregularity, almost aberration in his mind,” Pierce told Chase. “This is not the first time since his arrival, where he has acted without premeditation or examination, and the next day recalled an order just issued. He has evidently brooded over the arming of negroes for some time, and seemed to be carried away by it, and in his action, ignores all sources of information. . . . I confess to a want of confidence in his discretion and the regular action of his mind.”¹⁵¹ The New York Tribune, though disappointed, said: “Let no one be discouraged nor alienated because of this Presidential

¹⁴⁹ Philip A. Bell in the Pacific Appeal, 14 June 1862, in C. Peter Ripley, ed., The Black Abolitionist Papers (5 vols.; Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985-92), 5:143-45

¹⁵⁰ Andrew to Stanton, 19 May 1862, in Henry Greenleaf Pearson, The Life of John A. Andrew, Governor of Massachusetts, 1861-1865 (2 vols.; Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1904), 2:12-13.

¹⁵¹ Pierce to Chase, Port Royal, S.C., 13 May 1862, Niven, ed., Chase Papers, 3:199.

step.”¹⁵² The Independent pointed out that Lincoln was “very careful not to reject the principle” of emancipation as a military necessity.¹⁵³ Samuel J. May Jr. acknowledged that that Hunter’s proclamation interfered with Lincoln’s offer of compensated emancipation and “would even seem to cast a doubt on the sincerity & honesty of it.”¹⁵⁴ While deploring Lincoln’s action, the National Anti-Slavery Standard was “glad to observe that the language of the President encourages the hope that he will himself, ere long, exercise the power he denies to his subordinates, and proclaim liberty, not alone in South Carolina, Georgia and Florida, but ‘throughout all the land, unto all the inhabitants thereof.’”¹⁵⁵ Many Republicans shared that optimism, though some thought Lincoln’s warning a mere “sugar-coated pill” to placate Radicals.¹⁵⁶

Carl Schurz, who regretted the timing of Hunter’s proclamation, offered Lincoln solace: “I do not see how you could have acted otherwise, at least at the present moment; and I am especially glad that you have given no additional declaration of policy but reserved to yourself the use of your constitutional powers and prerogatives. At the same time there is one thing to be considered. You told me a week ago in the course of our confidential conversation, that you expected to be left without support at the next congressional elections by the Republican party as well as the democratic; by the latter, because you were too radical and by the former, because you were not radical enough. It is indeed true, that misunderstandings between yourself and the Republicans may

¹⁵² New York Tribune, 20 May 1862.

¹⁵³ New York Independent, 22 May 1862.

¹⁵⁴ Samuel J. May Jr. to Richard Webb, Boston, 27 May 1862, May Papers, Boston Public Library.

¹⁵⁵ National Anti-Slavery Standard (New York), 24 May 1862; W. M. Dickson to Friedrich Hassaurek, Cincinnati, 9 June 1862, Hassaurek Papers, Ohio Historical Society.

¹⁵⁶ Washington correspondence, 26 May, National Anti-Slavery Standard (New York), 31 May 1862.

possibly arise. After you had explained your policy to me the other day I left you perfectly happy and contented, fully convinced that, in spite of appearances to the contrary, you were determined to use all your constitutional power to deliver this country of the great curse, and so I would receive all your acts and manifestations with the utmost confidence.” But some true friends of freedom needed to be reassured by other actions, Schurz advised. Make gestures to placate them, he urged.¹⁵⁷

THE SUGAR-COATED PILL: PLACATING RADICALS

Lincoln took that advice, pleasing Radicals by signing legislation to extend diplomatic recognition to Haiti and Liberia, by approving a treaty with Great Britain strictly enforcing the ban on the African slave trade, and by forbidding the military to return slaves reaching Union lines.¹⁵⁸ He had sanctioned Benjamin Butler’s stratagem of declaring slaves who entered his lines “contraband,” a policy which Winfield Scott referred to as “Butler’s fugitive slave law.”¹⁵⁹

Repeatedly Lincoln insisted that bondsmen reaching Union lines would never be surrendered.¹⁶⁰ In early March, 1862, he assured Judge John W. Edmonds that “no slave

¹⁵⁷ George W. Smalley to Sydney Howard Gay, Strasburg [Virginia], 21 June 1862, Gay Papers, Columbia University; Schurz to Lincoln, Philadelphia, 19 May 1862, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

¹⁵⁸ Cameron to Butler, Washington, 30 May 1861, New York Tribune, 31 May 1862; message to the senate, 10 April 1862, Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 5:186; Washington correspondence, 15 March, New York Times, 16 March 1862.

¹⁵⁹ Richard S. West, Jr., Lincoln’s Scapegoat General: A Life of Benjamin F. Butler, 1818-1893 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), 76-86; Blair to Butler, n.d., Blanche Butler Ames, ed., Private and Official Correspondence of Gen. Benjamin F. Butler, During the Period of the Civil War (5 vols.; Norwood, Massachusetts: Plimpton Press, 1917), 1:116.

¹⁶⁰ Early in the war, however, he recommended informally to General Scott that owners of slaves who accompanied Union troops from Maryland into Virginia be allowed to retrieve their bondsmen. O.R., II, 1:60.

freed by the advance of our army would be returned.”¹⁶¹ A few days later he approved an article of war prohibiting military forces from returning runaways.¹⁶² In April, he declared to representatives of the Freedmen’s Association: “I am entirely satisfied that no slave who becomes for the time free within the American lines will ever be re-enslaved. Rather than have it so, I would give up and abdicate.”¹⁶³ That month, D. W. Bartlett reported that Lincoln “has said a hundred times that not with his consent, not if he can hinder it, shall any slave ever be remanded to chains and servitude by the restoration of peace.”¹⁶⁴ On July 1, Lincoln showed Orville H. Browning a paper he had drafted stating that while no slaves “necessarily taken or escaping during the war are ever to be returned to slavery,” on the other hand “[n]o inducements are to be held out to them to come into our lines for they come now faster than we can provide for them and are becoming an embarrassment to the government.”¹⁶⁵ Two days later, Stanton informed General Butler that the president “is of the opinion that, under the law of Congress, they [runaway slaves] cannot be sent back to their masters; that, in common humanity, they must not be permitted to suffer for want of food, shelter or other necessaries of life; that, to this end, they should be provided for by the quartermaster and commissary departments, and that those who are capable of labor should be set to work and paid reasonable wages.”¹⁶⁶

¹⁶¹ George W. Curtis to Charles Eliot Norton, North Shore, New York, 6 March 1862, Curtis Papers, Harvard University.

¹⁶² Washington correspondence, 16 March, New York World, 17 March 1862.

¹⁶³ Washington correspondence, 14 April, New York Tribune, 15 April 1862.

¹⁶⁴ Washington correspondence by Van [D. W. Bartlett], 29 April, Springfield (Massachusetts) Republican, 1 May 1862.

¹⁶⁵ Pease and Randall, eds., Browning Diary, 1:555 (entry for 1 July 1862).

¹⁶⁶ O.R., III, 2:200; New York Herald, 11 July 1862.

When a leading Kentucky Unionist protested that federal troops refused to turn over his runaway slave, Lincoln offered to pay \$500 out of his own pocket to settle the matter.¹⁶⁷

Diplomatic recognition of Haiti and Liberia had long been resisted on the grounds that those nations might send blacks to represent them at Washington.¹⁶⁸ Lincoln, however, did not object to that possibility. When James Redpath told him that President Fabre Nicolas Geffrard of Haiti was willing to appoint a white representative rather than a black one to Washington, Lincoln replied: “Well – you can tell Mr. Geffrard that I shan’t tear my shirt if he does send a negro here!”¹⁶⁹ (The Haitian government appointed a black army colonel, Ernest Roumain, as its first minister to the U.S.)

Especially pleasing to Radicals was Lincoln’s decision in early 1862 to approve the execution Nathaniel Gordon, the only American ever hanged for slave trading. When the prosecutor in the case, E. Delafield Smith, visited Washington to urge the president to uphold the death sentence, Lincoln said: “You do not know how hard it is to have a human being die when you know that a stroke of your pen may save him.”¹⁷⁰ (Similarly, he told the governor of Missouri that he “could not bear to have the power to save a man’s life and not do it.”)¹⁷¹ The president was torn, explaining to Dr. Robert K. Stone, his family physician, that he did not want to execute slave traders “but that he did not wish to be announced as having pardoned them, lest it might be thought at Richmond that

¹⁶⁷ J. Winston Coleman, “Lincoln and Old Buster,” Lincoln Herald 46 (February 1944):3-9.

¹⁶⁸ Charles H. Wesley, “The Struggle for the Recognition of Haiti and Liberia as Independent Republics,” Journal of Negro History 4 (1917): 369-83.

¹⁶⁹ Washington correspondence by Van [D. W. Bartlett], 24 June, Springfield (Massachusetts) Republican, 27 June 1862.

¹⁷⁰ Ethan Allen, “Lincoln and the Slave Trader Gordon,” in William Ward Hayes, ed., Abraham Lincoln, Tributes of His Associates: Reminiscences of Soldiers, Statesmen, and Citizens (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1895), 168.

¹⁷¹ Hamilton R. Gamble to Lincoln, St. Louis, 2 May 1863, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

he feared the consequences of such action and then he might be compelled to hang fifty such men.”¹⁷²

To his Illinois friend Congressman Henry P. H. Bromwell, Lincoln said “you don’t know how they [Gordon’s supporters] followed and pressed to get him pardoned, or his sentence commuted.”¹⁷³ The pressure had been intense indeed; thousands of New Yorkers signed petitions appealing for commutation of the sentence. The New York World reported that every “possible social, professional and other interested influence has been brought to bear upon Mr. Lincoln, and it is stated that never before has a President been so thoroughly and persistently approached for official interference as in this case. Every possible argument which the ingenuity of counsel, the regard of relatives, or the fear of mercantile accomplices could suggest, has been used.”¹⁷⁴ On behalf of Gordon, funds were poured out, a rally took place on Wall Street, and congressmen and senators lobbied the president.

Lincoln’s resolve may have been stiffened by Charles Sumner, who told him that Gordon must be executed in order to “deter slave traders, to “give notice to the world of a change of policy,” and to demonstrate “that the Govt. can hang a man.”¹⁷⁵ The New York World agreed: “A more deliberate, cold-blooded, nefarious, accursed, infernal crime it is not possible for a human being to commit. If we are to cheat the gallows of such guilt, we

¹⁷² Lincoln told this to Dr. Stone, who told it to Gordon’s father, who in turn told it to the author of a letter dated Wednesday (probably written in January or February 1862 but misfiled August 1851) signed “H.” and addressed to “Dear Sir” (probably John W. Garrett), Garrett Family Papers, Library of Congress.

¹⁷³ Denver Tribune, 18 May 1879.

¹⁷⁴ New York World, 6 February 1862.

¹⁷⁵ Sumner to Orestes Brownson, Washington, 2 February 1862, Beverly Wilson Palmer, ed., The Selected Letters of Charles Sumner (2 vols.; Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1990), 2:100.

may as well at once abolish the gallows altogether.”¹⁷⁶ A Massachusetts antislavery militant, John Murray Forbes, asked: “Is he [Gordon], like the rattlesnake in camp . . . to be released? The great want of the hour is to see one spy . . . hanged But if this one wish of the nation can not be gratified, can we not at least hang one of the pirates who have sacrificed such hecatombs of Africans?”¹⁷⁷

Fearing that the president might commute the death sentence, U.S. Marshal Robert Murray hastened from New York to Washington, where he explained to the president “that mercy would be misapplied in this instance, and if extended, that it would only embolden the slave traders and give the government a character for timidity and incompetency.” Lincoln assured him “that no change in the sentence would be extended by him.” Gordon’s beautiful young wife also traveled to the capital, where she won the sympathy of Mary Lincoln. But it did her no good, for Lincoln would not allow the First Lady to raise the subject.

Ultimately the president refused to commute Gordon’s sentence, telling the prisoner’s intercessors that the “slave-trade will never be put down till our laws are executed, and the penalty of death has once been enforced upon the offenders.” The statute had been thought unenforceable.¹⁷⁸

When Gordon’s lawyer sent Lincoln a last-minute appeal for mercy, the president forwarded it and accompanying documents to Attorney General Bates, who advised that the chief executive “has no right to stop the course of law, except on grounds of excuse or mitigation found in the case itself – and not to arrest the execution of the statute merely

¹⁷⁶ New York World, 29 January 1862.

¹⁷⁷ Sarah Forbes Hughes, ed., Letters and Recollections of John Murray Forbes (2 vols.; Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1899), 1:285.

¹⁷⁸ New York Tribune, 6 February 1862; New York World, 29 January 1862.

because he thinks the law wrong or too severe.”¹⁷⁹ Lincoln did allow a brief postponement of Gordon’s execution, but nothing more. He counseled the prisoner to relinquish “all expectation of pardon by Human Authority” and “refer himself alone to the mercy of the common God and Father of all men.”¹⁸⁰

In New York, George Templeton Strong applauded Gordon’s execution. “Served him right,” Strong wrote, “and our unprecedented execution of justice on a criminal of this particular class and at this particular time will do us good abroad, perhaps with the pharisaical shop-keepers and bagmen of England itself.” He hoped that the courts, acting on this precedent, would “promptly exterminate every man who imports niggers into this continent.” Strong admired the backbone Lincoln displayed in resisting appeals for clemency. “Immense efforts were made to get the man pardoned or his punishment commuted. Lincoln told me of them He deserves credit for his firmness. The Executive has no harder duty, ordinarily, than the denial of mercy and grace asked by wives and friends and philanthropes.”¹⁸¹ Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper insisted that Gordon’s execution was necessary “to show to the friends of Freedom throughout the world that we are really entitled to their sympathies and support.”¹⁸²

A Massachusetts citizen who applauded the execution of “the wretched pirate” viewed it as part of the administration’s general campaign against slave trading. “Mr Lincoln, in selecting his district attorneys and marshals, had an eye to their capacities for arresting the foreign slave trade. Under the energetic and sagacious action of his officers

¹⁷⁹ Howard K. Beale, ed., The Diary of Edward Bates, 1859-1866 (Annual Report of the American Historical Association for the Year 1930, vol. IV; Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1933), 233 (entry for 18 February 1862).

¹⁸⁰ Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 5:128-129.

¹⁸¹ Nevins and Thomas, eds., Strong Diary, 3:209 (entry for 22 February 1862).

¹⁸² Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper, 15 March 1862.

slave ships which, under former administrations, boldly entered our northern ports to fit out for their atrocious and inhuman voyages, are now suppressed. . . . He has made with England a most stringent treaty, to insure the suppression of the slave trade. . . . Without the professions of a philanthropist, Mr L. has evinced a noble and generous nature, and should rank with the honored names of Clarkson and Wilberforce.”¹⁸³ A similar view was taken by the London Daily News, which speculated that “Gordon would have had a better chance had his life depended on the decision of some impulsive negro-ophile, instead of being at the disposal of the severe, deliberative, but inflexible tenant of the White House, a man who, amidst the severest trials has never swerved a hair’s breadth from the policy which he professed when he was a candidate for office. Those who knew President Lincoln well said that he would not lose the precious opportunity to strike a blow at a system which costs hundreds of lives yearly and dooms the brave men of the two African squadrons to ruin their health on a pestilential coast.” The president’s refusal to alter the death sentence “is an index of the quality of Mr. Lincoln’s government, of its strength of principle, and the consistency of its policy, and it marks the end of a system.”¹⁸⁴

Many abolitionists applauded the president, though a protégé of Thaddeus Stevens wondered why Lincoln would hang Gordon and yet allow men like John C. Breckinridge and Beriah Magoffin to go unmolested. Similarly, the president’s old friend Erastus Wright asked: “If Lincoln directed Gordon hung Why should he treat with complacency those who are in fellowship and complicity, who are equally guilty?”¹⁸⁵ In

¹⁸³ Undated letter by “Pynchon,” a resident of Hampden County, Massachusetts, to the editor, Springfield (Massachusetts) Republican, 8 July 1862.

¹⁸⁴ London Daily News, 8 March 1862, in Soodalter, *Hanging Captain Gordon, 226-227.

¹⁸⁵ Erastus Wright to E. B. Washburne, Springfield, 11 April 1864, Washburne Papers, Library of Congress.

fact, Lincoln did pardon some slave traders. When, however, Massachusetts Congressman John B. Alley appealed to him on behalf of one who had served his prison sentence but had been unable to pay his fine, the president replied sternly: “I believe I am kindly enough in nature and can be moved to pity and to pardon the perpetrator of almost the worst crime that the mind of man can conceive or the arm of man can execute; but any man, who, for paltry gain and stimulated only by avarice, can rob Africa of her children to sell into interminable bondage, I will never pardon, and he may stay and rot in jail before he will ever get relief from me.”¹⁸⁶

Lincoln’s contempt for slave traders applied to the domestic as well as foreign trade. In 1864, upon hearing that Confederate cavalry raider and slave-dealer John Hunt Morgan had been killed, he told an army chaplain: “Well, I wouldn’t crow over anybody’s death, but I assure you that I take this as resignedly as I could take any dispensation of Providence. This Morgan was a nigger-driver. You Northern men don’t know anything about such low, mean, cowardly creatures.” He added that “Southern slaveholders despise them. But such a wretch has been used to carry on their rebellion.”¹⁸⁷

Those steps gratified some Radicals, including Charles Sumner, who was deeply impressed with Lincoln’s sincere commitment to the cause of freedom. In June, the Massachusetts senator told an abolitionist friend: “Could you have seen the President – as it was my privilege often – while he was considering the great questions on which he has already acted – the invitation to Emancipation in the [Border] States, Emancipation in

¹⁸⁶ Allen Thorndike Rice, ed., Reminiscences of Abraham Lincoln by Distinguished Men of His Time (New York: North American Review, 1888), 582-83.

¹⁸⁷ J. P. Thompson, “A Talk with President Lincoln,” The Congregationalist and Boston Recorder, 30 March 1866, 50.

the District of Columbia, and the acknowledgment of the independence of Hayti and Liberia – even your zeal would have been satisfied, for you would have felt the sincerity of his purpose to do what he could to carry forward the principles of the Declaration of Independence. His whole soul was occupied, especially by the first proposition, which was peculiarly his own. In familiar intercourse with him, I remember nothing more touching than the earnestness and completeness with which he embraced this idea. To his mind, it was just and beneficent, while it promised the sure end of Slavery.”¹⁸⁸ Months earlier, Lincoln confided to Sumner “that he was now convinced that this [war] was a great movement of God to end slavery & that the man wd. be a fool who shd. stand in the way.”¹⁸⁹ (Despite their political and temperamental differences, Lincoln and the Massachusetts senator managed to get along fairly well, in part because – as Lincoln put it – “Sumner thinks he runs me.”)¹⁹⁰

Lydia Maria Child wrote Sumner that she agreed with his assessment of the president: “I believe he is, as you think, honest and right-minded.” She did, however, “wish he were a man strong enough to lead popular opinion, instead of following it so conscientiously.” Nevertheless she rejoiced “that so much has been accomplished. Slavery has been abolished in the District, an event which I had long given up the expectation of living to see. Liberia and Hayti are recognized as States among the sisterhood of nations. Military officers are forbidden to return fugitive slaves.” In addition, slavery had been abolished in the territories.¹⁹¹ After visiting the president in

¹⁸⁸ Sumner to a personal friend, Washington, 5 June 1862, The Liberator (Boston), 20 June 1862.

¹⁸⁹ Moncure D. Conway to his wife Ellen, n.p., 17 March [1862], Conway Papers, Columbia University.

¹⁹⁰ Ida M. Tarbell, The Life of Abraham Lincoln (4 vols.; New York: Lincoln History Society, 1900), 3:73.

¹⁹¹ Child to Sumner, Wayland, Massachusetts, 22 June 1862, Lydia Maria Child Letters, ed. Meltzer and Holland, 412.

April, William Goodell reported that Lincoln was open-minded and “sincerely desirous of doing what was best for the country.”¹⁹² A black writing from Brooklyn said “every colored man” should “uphold the present administration, because it is doing more for his race than has ever been done since the organization of the government. Never has a President, or cabinet officer stood forth to vindicate the rights of black men before.” He was especially thankful for the attorney general’s 1862 ruling that blacks were citizens and the secretary of state’s decision to issue them passports. Beyond that, “the recognition of the republics of Liberia and Hayti, [and] the acceptance of ambassadors from these countries, all demonstrate that this administration is the friend of the black race, and desires its prosperity no less than the good will of all the races of men.”¹⁹³

The steps Lincoln took to please militant opponents of slavery were not enough to satisfy them all; some wanted every slave of disloyal owners freed, even if those slaves were not being used directly to support the Confederate military. The abolitionist George Luther Stearns told Charles Sumner that he “could hope for nothing good from the imbecility in Washington.”¹⁹⁴

On July 12, Lincoln made his third and final appeal to Border State lawmakers, urging them to support his gradual emancipation plan and gently chiding them for having failed to endorse that proposal. “I intend no reproach or complaint when I assure you that in my opinion, if you all had voted for the resolution in the gradual emancipation message of last March, the war would now be substantially ended. And the plan therein proposed is yet one of the most potent, and swift means of ending it. Let the states which

¹⁹² Principia, 10 April 1862, in M. Leon Perkal, “William Goodell: A Life of Reform” (Ph.D. dissertation, City University of New York, 1972), 304.

¹⁹³ Christian Recorder, 12 September 1863.

¹⁹⁴ Stearns to Sumner, Boston, 10 February 1862, Sumner Papers, Harvard University.

are in rebellion see, definitely and certainly, that, in no event, will the states you represent ever join their proposed Confederacy, and they can not, much longer maintain the contest. But you can not divest them of their hope to ultimately have you with them so long as you show a determination to perpetuate the institution within your own states. Beat them at elections, as you have overwhelmingly done, and, nothing daunted, they still claim you as their own. You and I know what the lever of their power is. Break that lever before their faces, and they can shake you no more forever.”

Lincoln implored them to think rationally about the future, to realize that slavery was doomed, and that they might as well accept gradual, compensated emancipation now rather than risk sudden, uncompensated emancipation later. “Most of you have treated me with kindness and consideration; and I trust you will not now think I improperly touch what is exclusively your own, when, for the sake of the whole country I ask ‘Can you, for your states, do better than to take the course I urge?’] Discarding punctillio and maxims adapted to more manageable times, and looking only to the unprecedentedly stern facts of our case, can you do better in any possible even? You prefer that the constitutional relation of the states to the nation shall be practically restored, without disturbance of the institution; and if this were done, my whole duty, in this respect, under the constitution, and my oath of office, would be performed. But it is not done, and we are trying to accomplish it by war. The incidents of the war can not be avoided. If the war continue long, as it must, if the object be not sooner attained, the institution in your states will be extinguished by mere friction and abrasion – by the mere incidents of the war. It will be gone, and you will have nothing valuable in lieu of it. Much of it's value is gone already. How much better for you, and for your people, to take the step which, at once, shortens

the war, and secures substantial compensation for that which is sure to be wholly lost in any other event. How much better to thus save the money which else we sink forever in the war. How much better to do it while we can, lest the war ere long render us pecuniarily unable to do it. How much better for you, as seller, and the nation as buyer, to sell out, and buy out, that without which the war could never have been, than to sink both the thing to be sold, and the price of it, in cutting one another's throats. I do not speak of emancipation at once, but of a decision at once to emancipate gradually. Room in South America for colonization, can be obtained cheaply, and in abundance; and when numbers shall be large enough to be company and encouragement for one another, the freed people will not be so reluctant to go.”

The president begged them to view things from his perspective, to realize how much pressure he was under to abolish slavery by decree, especially after he had overruled David Hunter. “I am pressed with a difficulty not yet mentioned – one which threatens division among those who, united are none too strong. An instance of it is known to you. Gen. Hunter is an honest man. He was, and I hope, still is, my friend. I valued him none the less for his agreeing with me in the general wish that all men everywhere, could be free. He proclaimed all men free within certain states, and I repudiated the proclamation. He expected more good, and less harm from the measure, than I could believe would follow. Yet in repudiating it, I gave dissatisfaction, if not offence, to many whose support the country can not afford to lose. And this is not the end of it. The pressure, in this direction, is still upon me, and is increasing. By conceding what I now ask, you can relieve me, and much more, can relieve the country, in this important point. Upon these considerations I have again begged your attention to the

message of March last. Before leaving the Capital, consider and discuss it among yourselves. You are patriots and statesmen; and, as such, I pray you, consider this proposition; and, at the least, commend it to the consideration of your states and people.”

In closing his remarks, Lincoln appealed to their idealism. “As you would perpetuate popular government for the best people in the world, I beseech you that you do in no wise omit this. Our common country is in great peril, demanding the loftiest views, and boldest action to bring it speedy relief. Once relieved, it's form of government is saved to the world; it's beloved history, and cherished memories, are vindicated; and it's happy future fully assured, and rendered inconceivably grand. To you, more than to any others, the privilege is given, to assure that happiness, and swell that grandeur, and to link your own names therewith forever.”¹⁹⁵

Two days later the president submitted to Congress a bill compensating any state which would abolish slavery voluntarily.¹⁹⁶ Some thought Lincoln's approach might eventually work. “It is not at all improbable that the Presdt's way of managing this matter may turn out the best,” Maine Congressman Frederick Pike wrote on July 13. “Kentucky is getting accustomed to the policy. What would shock her six months ago she tolerates now very readily.”¹⁹⁷ But most of Pike's colleagues agreed with Vermont Senator Jacob Collamer, who called the bill “ridiculous” and reported that it was received with “considerable disappointment.” Free State members were, the senator said, “about sick of this dickering, bargaining business. The feeling is, that inasmuch as a fair offer had been

¹⁹⁵ Appeal of Border State representatives, 12 July 1862, Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 5:317-19.

¹⁹⁶ Message to Congress, 14 July 1862, Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 5:324-25.

¹⁹⁷ Frederick Pike to J. S. Pike, Washington, 13 July 1862, Pike Papers, University of Maine.

made, and the border states show no signs of accepting it, that they had better be left alone until great events shall terrify them into compliance.”¹⁹⁸

They were unterrified. On July 14, twenty of the twenty-eight members of the Border State delegations discourteously and insultingly rejected Lincoln’s appeal.¹⁹⁹ As their reply was being drafted, he bluntly advised one of its authors, John A. Crisfield: “You had better come to an agreement. Niggers will never be higher.”²⁰⁰

This negative response badly depressed Lincoln.²⁰¹ On July 15, Orville H. Browning found him looking “weary, care-worn, and troubled.” Alarmed by his appearance, Browning said: “your fortunes Mr President are bound up with those of the Country, and disaster to one would be disaster to the other, and I hope you will do all you can to preserve your health and life.” Lincoln “looked very sad, and there was a cadence of deep sadness in his voice” as he replied that he felt “tolerably well” and added “in a very tender and touching tone, ‘I must die sometime.’” As Browning bade good-bye, both he and Lincoln had tears in their eyes.²⁰²

To Illinois Congressmen Owen Lovejoy and Isaac Arnold, Lincoln vented his disappointment at the Border State delegations. Looking “weary, care-worn, and troubled,” he exclaimed: “Oh, how I wish the border states would accept my proposition. Then, you, Lovejoy, and you, Arnold, and all of us, would not have lived in vain! The

¹⁹⁸ Adams S. Hill to Sydney Howard Gay, Washington, 14 July 1862, Gay Papers, Columbia University; Washington correspondence, 15 July, New York Evening Post, 16 July 1862; Washington correspondence by Van [D. W. Bartlett], 15 July, Springfield (Massachusetts) Republican, 19 July 1862.

¹⁹⁹ Benjamin Bannan to Lincoln, Pottsville, [Pa.], 24 July 1862; C. A. Wickliffe and other Border State Congressmen to Lincoln, Washington, 14 July 1862; A. J. Clements and other dissenting Border State Congressmen to Lincoln, Washington 15 July 1862, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

²⁰⁰ Ward Hill Lamon, Recollections of Abraham Lincoln, 1847-1865, ed. Dorothy Lamon Teillard (Washington: the editor, 1911), 290.

²⁰¹ Welles ep essay* 237.

²⁰² Pease and Randall, eds., Browning Diary, 1:559 (entry for 15 July 1862).

labor of your life, Lovejoy, would be crowned with success."²⁰³ He expressed astonishment, indignation, surprise, and dismay at Virginia Senator John S. Carlisle and Congressman Charles A. Wickliffe (an elderly, “ugly-cross” Kentuckian), both of whom had heatedly denounced Lincoln’s plan.²⁰⁴

CONGRESS APPLIES HEAT: THE SECOND CONFISCATION ACT

Radicals also exasperated Lincoln. In December 1861, Senator Lyman Trumbull introduced legislation embodying the Radicals’ demands for stronger action to liberate slaves and punish rebels. Known as the Second Confiscation Act, it reflected the mood of the Northern public, which clamored for stern measures against the Confederates. The publisher of the Lincoln-Douglas debates declared that “the people are anxious that Congress should really feel that we are at War, that Rebels are Enemies that their property and their negroes, is not half so precious as the lives of our brave and noble soldiers, and that the speedy enactment of a law confiscating the one, and liberating the other class of property, would be an evidence, that the peoples representatives are in Earnest, having the bravery to vote, while the people fight.”²⁰⁵ According to Henry Winter Davis, the people of the North “feel that there is not brains enough at Washington to put down the insurrection by skillfully used military power, which has been furnished

²⁰³ Isaac N. Arnold, The History of Abraham Lincoln and the Overthrow of Slavery (Chicago: Clarke, 1866), 251.

²⁰⁴ Washington correspondence by Agate [Whitelaw Reid], 5 August, Cincinnati Gazette, 8 August 1862; Washington correspondence by Van [D. W. Bartlett], 15 July, Springfield (Massachusetts) Republican, 19 July 1862; Chicago Tribune, 2 August 1862; Washington correspondence by Van D. W. B[artlett], 4 August, New York Independent, 7 august 1862.

²⁰⁵ Frank E. Foster to John Sherman, Columbus, 10 May 1862, John Sherman Papers, Library of Congress. The papers of John Sherman contain many other letters calling for legislation confiscating rebel property. See, for example, James T. Worthington to John Sherman, Chillicothe, Ohio, 8 May 1862.

ample, adequate & magnificent; & this bill is their mode of saying so. It is the transition from military suppression to revolutionary suppression.”²⁰⁶

After months of congressional debate, a watered-down version of the bill introduced by the Radical Lyman Trumbull (primarily reshaped by senate moderates like Jacob Collamer of Vermont and William Pitt Fessenden of Maine) passed on July 12, providing that slaves of disloyal masters – not just those directly employed in direct support of the Confederate military – were free and that the property of rebels could be confiscated. An additional provision authorized the enlistment of freedmen as soldiers.²⁰⁷ Trumbull believed that “[p]roclaiming freedom to any slave who shall escape to our lines is worth more than many victories, & this the confiscation bill proposes to do.”²⁰⁸ Henry Winter Davis was skeptical, calling the statute “one of those shapeless agglomerations which com[mi]ttees of conference after long labor bring forth – with the features of both parents & usually the worst of both.”²⁰⁹

Moderate and conservative Republicans urged Lincoln to veto the Second Confiscation Act, which seemed to violate the Constitution’s ban on bills of attainder and ex post facto legislation. Orville H. Browning, who feared that if the bill became law “there will be fifty thousand increased bayonets against us, in the Border States,” told the president that “he had reached the culminating point in his administration, and his course

²⁰⁶ Henry Winter Davis to Samuel Francis Du Pont, [Baltimore], [no day indicated] July 1862, transcript, S. F. Du Pont Papers, Hagley Museum, Wilmington, Delaware.

²⁰⁷ John Syrett, “The Confiscation Acts: Efforts at Reconstruction during the Civil War” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1971), 23-55; Duke Frederick, “The Second Confiscation Act: A Chapter of Civil War Politics” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 1966), 118-244; Silvana R. Siddali, From Property to Person: Slavery and the Confiscation Acts, 1861-1862 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005), pp?* .

²⁰⁸ Trumbull to his wife, Washington, 12 July 1862, Trumbull Family Papers, Lincoln Presidential Library, Springfield.

²⁰⁹ Henry Winter Davis to Samuel Francis Du Pont, [Baltimore], [no day indicated] July 1862, transcript, S. F. Du Pont Papers, Hagley Museum, Wilmington, Delaware.

upon this bill was to determine whether he was to control the abolitionists and radicals, or whether they were to control him;” that “the tide in his affairs had come and he ought to take it at its flood;” that “if he vetoed it he would raise a storm of enthusiasm in support of the Administration in the border states which would be worth to us 100,000 muskets, whereas if he approved it I feared our friends could no longer sustain themselves there;” that “we could not succeed without unity of sentiment and purpose which would be secured by a veto as that would at once bring to his support every loyal Democrat in the free states, and consolidate all truly loyal men into one party – whereas if approved it would form the basis upon which the democratic party would again rally, and reorganize an opposition to the administration.” Lincoln promised to give this advice “his profound consideration.”²¹⁰

As he thought over Browning’s advice, Lincoln asked Congress to delay its planned adjournment. When told that the members were exceedingly reluctant to do so unless there were a true emergency, he somewhat testily remarked: “I am sorry Senators could not so far trust me as to believe I had some real cause for wishing them to remain. I am considering a bill which came to me only late in the day yesterday, and the subject of which has perplexed Congress for more than half a year. I may return it with objections; and if I should, I wish Congress to have the opportunity of obviating the objections, or of passing it into a law notwithstanding them.”²¹¹ Secluding himself, he hurriedly prepared a veto message dealing with the confiscation of rebel property beyond the natural life of the

²¹⁰ Israel D. Andrews to David Davis, Washington, 16 July 1862, Davis Papers, Lincoln Presidential Library, Springfield; Pease and Randall, eds., Browning Diary, 1:558 (entry for 14 July 1862).

²¹¹ Lincoln to Solomon Foot, Washington, 15 July 1862, Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 5:326.

guilty parties.²¹² Such confiscation, he argued, violated the Constitution’s ban on “corruption of blood.” Moreover, slave owners accused of treasonous acts committed before the passage of the bill would be victims of ex post facto legislation. As for a general policy in dealing with the Confederates, he counseled that the “severest justice may not always be the best policy.” But the president was careful to acknowledge his agreement with many provisions of the bill and with its ultimate aim. “That those who make a causeless war should be compelled to pay the cost of it, is too obviously just, to be called in question. To give governmental protection to the property of persons who have abandoned it, and gone on a crusade to overthrow that same government, is absurd.”²¹³

Indignant Radicals stormed into the White House and told Lincoln’s principal secretary that if the president vetoed the bill “he destroys the Republican party and ruins his Administration.”²¹⁴ They insisted that they would not compromise and threatened to denounce him publicly.²¹⁵ Senators Wade, Wilkinson, Trumbull and other Radicals predicted that “if the confiscation bill is not signed, & the policy of the government in prosecuting the war is not changed, the Union is gone.”²¹⁶ Fessenden thought that the president might “be mad enough to veto the Confiscation bill – Such an act will disappoint, & I fear will dishearten, the country.” Lincoln, said the Maine senator, “seems to be very much in the hands of the Philistines. Well – we have what we bargained for – a

²¹² Trumbull to his wife, Washington, 16 July 1862, Trumbull Family Papers, Lincoln Presidential Library, Springfield; New York Tribune, 16 July 1862.

²¹³ Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 5:328-31.

²¹⁴ Washington correspondence by Agate [Whitelaw Reid], 16 July, Cincinnati Gazette, 19 July 1862.

²¹⁵ Washington correspondence, 15 July, New York Times, 16 July 1862.

²¹⁶ Trumbull to his wife, Washington, 16 July 1862, Trumbull Family Papers, Lincoln Presidential Library, Springfield.

Splitter of rails – and have no right to complain.”²¹⁷ Republicans in caucus denounced Lincoln “as the deliberate betrayer of the freedmen and poor whites.”²¹⁸

Gerrit Smith concluded that Lincoln “is bound hand and foot by the Pro-Slavery regard for the Constitution in which he was educated.” Further inhibiting him, Smith concluded, was public opinion, for “in every part of the North you meet with this insanity about our Constitutional obligations to the Rebels.” During the emergency the country faced, the Constitution was no more useful as a guide than “an old almanac,” Smith cavalierly asserted. The Framers’ handiwork was to be preserved in peacetime, but “in time of war, save the Country with or without the Constitution.”²¹⁹ Others complained that the president shirked his duty as a leader and was acting merely as “a moderator between contending factions, helping the one today & the other tomorrow & holding for the present, each in fealty to himself by the hope that he holds out that he will finally be with one of them. Neither break[s] with him because each yet hopes him to be on its side.”²²⁰

Lincoln would not have disagreed with this analysis, for he considered it his duty to hold the party – and the North – together. To avoid a confrontation with Congress, he met secretly with some members to hammer out a compromise.²²¹ On July 15, Tennessee Representative Horace Maynard, evidently at the president’s suggestion, introduced a “joint resolution for the purpose of correcting the confiscation act” which refined the

²¹⁷ Fessenden to Hamilton Fish, Washington, 15 July 1862, Fish Papers, Library of Congress.

²¹⁸ George W. Julian in Rice, ed., Reminiscences of Lincoln, 58.

²¹⁹ Smith to George Thompson, 25 January 1862, printed letter, in Harlow, Smith, 431-32.

²²⁰ W. M. Dickson to Friedrich Hassaurek, Cincinnati, 9 June 1862, Hassaurek Papers, Ohio Historical Society.

²²¹ Adams S. Hill to Sydney Howard Gay, Washington, 17 July 1862, Gay Papers, Columbia University.

language so as to meet Lincoln’s desire for a more “justly discriminating application” of the measure.²²² That night Senators William P. Fessenden of Maine and Daniel Clark of New Hampshire met with Lincoln, who warned them he would veto the bill unless it were modified to conform to the Constitution.²²³ The following day, Clark offered another amendment stating that no property would be confiscated beyond the lifetime of any offender. Despite the objections of Benjamin Wade and other Radical senators, who thought the president’s tactics “monstrous” (as Preston King put it), these provisos passed, and Lincoln signed the bill and the joint explanatory resolution.²²⁴ The ban on the forfeiture of property beyond the owners’ lifetime severely weakened the government’s ability to restructure the society and economy of the South. Many supporters of the original bill sought to make such dramatic reform possible, including Radical Congressman George W. Julian of Indiana, who said that the supplementary resolution was “inexpressibly provoking to a large majority of Congress.”²²⁵ Other Radicals were “profoundly disgusted” at what they considered “the President’s want of backbone.”²²⁶ Adams S. Hill of the New York Tribune expressed surprise “that a President can live in such utter ignorance of popular feeling.”²²⁷ But Charles Sumner acknowledged that Lincoln and Congress agreed on two fundamental principles: “Blacks are to be employed,

²²² Frederick, “Second Confiscation Act,” 211-14.

²²³ Adams S. Hill to Sydney Howard Gay, Washington, 17 July 1862, Gay Papers, Columbia University; Washington correspondence, 16 July, Chicago Tribune, 17 July 1862.

²²⁴ Washington correspondence, 16 July, New York Evening Post, 17 July 1862; Washington correspondence 16 July, Cincinnati Commercial, 17 July 1862; Syrett, “The Confiscation Acts,” 84-86.

²²⁵ Julian in Rice, ed., Reminiscences of Lincoln, 58.

²²⁶ Washington correspondence, 16 July, Cincinnati Commercial, 17 July 1862.

²²⁷ Adams S. Hill to Sydney Howard Gay, Washington, 17 July 1862, Gay Papers, Columbia University.

and slaves are to be freed. In this legislative proclamation the President and Congress will unite. Together they will deliver it to the country and to the world.”²²⁸

Curiously, Lincoln sent the House and senate a copy of his veto message, even though he now agreed to sign the modified bill. This uncharacteristically tactless gesture annoyed many members of Congress. As it was being read aloud, some lawmakers made irreverent cracks.²²⁹ One of them asked incredulously: “Whoever heard of the reading of a veto that was not a veto, or the production of a document the necessity for which had passed away?”²³⁰ According to the journalist Adams S. Hill, it was “entirely unexpected, and fell like a wet blanket upon his friends.” Everyone “was disgusted, and particularly those who were most ready to get down on their knees to avoid a vetoe [sic] yesterday. They got more than they bargained for, soiled their trousers, and got the vetoe to boot. Such men as Washburne, Gurley, Arnold, Sumner, and Conway, were ineffably disgusted. Washburne said he went out in order that he might not hear it read, and Collamer privately expressed the hope that it would not be read at all in the Senate.”²³¹ Congressman Julian later wrote that “[n]o one at a distance could have formed any adequate conception of the hostility of Republican members toward Mr. Lincoln, . . . while it was the belief of many that our last session of Congress had been held in Washington. Mr. Wade said that the country was going to hell, and that the scenes

²²⁸ Congressional Globe, 37th Congress, 2nd session, 3382 (16 July 1862).

²²⁹ Washington correspondence, 17 July, New York Evening Post, 18 July 1862.

²³⁰ Washington correspondence, 17 July, New York Herald, 18 July 1862.

²³¹ Adams S. Hill to Sydney Howard Gay, Washington, 17 July 1862, Gay Papers, Columbia University; Washington correspondence by Hill, 17 July, New York Tribune, 18 July 1862.

witnessed in the French Revolution were nothing in comparison to what we should see here.”²³² Republicans retaliated by filibustering a motion to print the message.²³³

Lincoln’s motive was unclear. Perhaps he intended to show Congress that on matters of slavery and reconstruction, he was master.²³⁴ On other legislative matters – such as taxation, public lands, and internal improvements – he generally followed traditional Whig doctrine, which called for the executive branch to defer to the legislature.²³⁵

On July 18, Congressman Isaac N. Arnold said that “within the last two or three days the President has been subjected to the greatest pressure in favor of vigorous war measures that was ever brought to bear upon him.”²³⁶ Among those exerting such pressure was the main author and promoter of the confiscation acts, Lyman Trumbull, who urged Lincoln to “use rebel property for the support of your armies, subsist off the enemy’s country, use negroes as laborers, and put arms in their hands when necessary. Give the country proof that you are in earnest and you can raise one hundred thousand soldiers in Illinois alone; adhere to the present peace policy of conducting the war, and you get none at all.”²³⁷ It is not known what Lincoln said in reply, but on July 17 John W. Forney publicly announced that the president had recently told him “that henceforth his policy should be as stringent as the most enthusiastic could desire. That hereafter there

²³² George W. Julian, Political Recollections, 1840 to 1872 (Chicago: Jansen, McClurg, 1884), 220.

²³³ Washington correspondence, 17 July, Chicago Tribune, 18 July 1862.

²³⁴ Frederick, “Second Confiscation Act,” 225.

²³⁵ David Donald, “Abraham Lincoln: Whig in the White House,” in Donald, Lincoln Reconsidered: Essays on the Civil War Era (New York: Knopf, 1956), 187-208.

²³⁶ Adams S. Hill to Sydney Howard Gay, Washington, 18 July 1862, Gay Papers, Columbia University.

²³⁷ Washington correspondence, 18 July, New York Evening Post, 19 July 1862. Some accounts indicate that Lincoln was called on by a delegation urging him to follow these policies and that he assured them he would do so. Washington National Republican, 22 July 1862. Trumbull did call on Lincoln on the 18th. Lyman Trumbull to Lincoln, Washington, 18 July 1862, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

will be no restriction in the employment of all men to put down this rebellion. No more doubting about the confiscation of rebel property. No longer need the northern people be frightened with the cry of negro equality and emancipation.”²³⁸

On July 25, Lincoln issued a proclamation warning all rebels that if they did not “cease participating in, aiding, countenancing, or abetting the existing rebellion,” they would suffer “the forfeitures and seizures” spelled out in the Second Confiscation Act.²³⁹ But because the statute provided no mechanisms either for enforcement or for oversight of its implementation (thus giving Lincoln wide discretionary power to carry it out as he saw fit), he virtually ignored it.²⁴⁰ In all likelihood he shared the view of Massachusetts Congressman Henry L. Dawes, who thought the legislation was not “worth the paper it is written upon to weaken the power of the enemy or strengthen our own.” In Dawes’ view, “Paper enactments are never going to close this war, nor free a slave nor seize a dollar of rebel property. Nothing can do it but the bayonet and the bullet and a purpose to use them.”²⁴¹

Though almost no Confederate property was seized under the provisions of the Second Confiscation Act, its passage was significant, for it helped pave the way for the Emancipation Proclamation. It showed Lincoln that such a proclamation would not be as politically risky as it had earlier seemed, and the lengthy Congressional debates helped

²³⁸ New York Evening Post, 19 July 1862.

²³⁹ Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 5:341.

²⁴⁰ Syrett, “Confiscation Acts,” 98-114.

²⁴¹ Henry L. Dawes to his wife, Washington, 29 June, 29 May 1862, Dawes Papers, Library of Congress.

undermine the notion that blacks were property.²⁴² As John Sherman noted, the statute “was more useful as a declaration of policy than as an act to be enforced.”²⁴³

BOMBSHELL: PROPOSAL TO ISSUE AN EMANCIPATION PROCLAMATION

On July 13, Lincoln took a fateful carriage ride with Welles and Seward. A day earlier he had unsuccessfully attempted to persuade the Border States to accept his gradual emancipation plan; that failure persuaded him it was time for more drastic steps.²⁴⁴ As he rode with his secretaries of state and the navy to attend the funeral of Stanton’s infant son, Lincoln discussed issuing an emancipation proclamation. According to Welles, he “dwelt earnestly on the gravity, importance, and delicacy of the movement, said he had given it much thought and had about come to the conclusion that it was a military necessity absolutely essential for the salvation of the Union, that we must free the slaves or be ourselves subdued, etc., etc.” This was “the first occasion when he had mentioned the subject to any one, and wished us to frankly state how the proposition struck us. Mr. Seward said the subject involved consequences so vast and momentous that he should wish to bestow on it mature reflection before giving a decisive answer, but his present opinion inclined to the measure as justifiable, and perhaps he might say expedient and necessary.” Welles agreed. “Two or three times on that ride the subject, which was of course an absorbing one for each and all, was adverted to, and before separating the President desired us to give the question special and deliberate attention, for he was earnest in the conviction that something must be done. It was a new departure

²⁴² Franklin, “Second Confiscation Act,” 235; Silvana R. Siddali, From Property to Person: Slavery and the Confiscation Acts, 1861-1862 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005), 249-50.

²⁴³ John Sherman, John Sherman’s Recollections of Forty Years in the House, Senate and Cabinet: An Autobiography (2 vols.; Chicago: Werner, 1895), 1:316.

²⁴⁴ Welles essay on ep 239, 240.*

for the President, for until this time, in all our previous interviews, whenever the question of emancipation or the mitigation of slavery had been in any way alluded to, he had been prompt and emphatic in denouncing any interference by the General Government with the subject. This was, I think, the sentiment of every member of the Cabinet, all of whom including the President, considered it a local, domestic question appertaining to the States respectively, who had never parted with their authority over it. But the reverses before Richmond, and the formidable power and dimensions of the insurrection, which extended through all the Slave States, and had combined most of them in a confederacy to destroy the Union, impelled the Administration to adopt extraordinary measures to preserve the national existence. The slaves, if not armed and disciplined, were in the service of those who were, not only as field laborers and producers, but thousands of them were in attendance upon the armies in the field, employed as waiters and teamsters, and the fortifications and intrenchments were constructed by them.”²⁴⁵

Though disappointed by the Border State lawmakers, Lincoln took heart from the positive response he received from Welles and Seward, the cabinet’s leading moderates. He assumed he could rely on the support of the more radical Chase and Stanton. Therefore he began drafting an emancipation proclamation that would be far more effective than the Confiscation Acts, which required a trial for disloyal slaveholders before their slaves would become legally free, and even then it was doubtful that the forfeiture of property could last beyond the lifetime of the convicted traitors.

To justify so momentous a step, Lincoln decided not to appeal to the idealism of the North by denouncing the immorality of slavery. He had already done that eloquently

²⁴⁵ Beale, ed., Welles Diary, 1:70-71; Welles to his son Edgar and to his wife Mary Jane, Washington, 13 July 1862, Welles Papers, Library of Congress.

and repeatedly between 1854 and 1860. Instead, he chose to rely on practical and constitutional arguments which he assumed would be more palatable to Democrats and conservative Republicans, especially in the Border States. He knew full well that those elements would object to sudden, uncompensated emancipation, and that many men who were willing to fight for the Union would be reluctant to do so for the liberation of slaves. To minimize their discontent, he would argue that emancipation facilitated the war effort by depriving Confederates of valuable workers. Slaves might not be fighting in the Rebel army, but they grew the food and fiber that nourished and clothed it. If those slaves could be induced to abandon the plantations and head for Union lines, the Confederates' ability to wage war would be greatly undermined. Military necessity, therefore, required the president to liberate the slaves, but not all of them. Residents of Slave States still loyal to the Union would have to be exempted, as well as those in areas of the Confederacy which the Union army had already pacified. Such restrictions might disappoint Radicals, but Lincoln was less worried about them than he was about Moderates and Conservatives.

The reliance on pragmatism rather than idealism to justify emancipation was not unique to Lincoln. Since the defeat at Bull Run, even Radicals like Massachusetts Senator Henry Wilson and abolitionists like Frederick Douglass had been urging that the slaves be freed in order to weaken the Confederacy militarily. Moderates and Conservatives echoed their appeals.²⁴⁶

Lincoln also feared that Roger Taney's supreme court might object. The constitutional basis for such a bold decree would have to be the war powers of the president, a somewhat vague concept implied in the chief executive's oath of office and

²⁴⁶ Siddali, From Property to Person, 82-83.

his status as “Commander-in-Chief of the Army and Navy of the United States.” In 1842, John Quincy Adams had emphatically insisted that in a civil or foreign war, “not only the President of the United States, but the commander of the army, has power to order the universal emancipation of the slaves.”²⁴⁷ Charles Sumner, Henry Ward Beecher and other antislavery militants had endorsed Adams’s dictum and urged Lincoln to act on it. With these thoughts in mind, Lincoln drafted his momentous proclamation.²⁴⁸ He may have been influenced by The War Powers of the President, and the Legislative Powers of Congress in Relation to Rebellion, Treason and Slavery, a book which appeared that spring. Written by the Boston abolitionist William Whiting, it argued that “the laws of war give the President full belligerent rights” and that “personal property of every kind, ammunition, provisions, contraband, or slaves, may be lawfully seized, whether of loyal or disloyal citizens, and is by law presumed hostile, and liable to condemnation, if captured within the rebellious districts. This right of seizure and condemnation is harsh, as all the proceedings of war are harsh, in the extreme, but it is nevertheless lawful.”²⁴⁹ Lincoln befriended Whiting and appointed him solicitor of the war department.

On July 20, John Hay told a friend that the president “has been, out of pure devotion to what he considers the best interests of humanity, the bulwark of the institution he abhors, for a year. But he will not conserve slavery much longer. When

²⁴⁷ Adams’ speech, 14 April 1842, John T. Morse, John Quincy Adams (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1887), 264-65.

²⁴⁸ The story of Lincoln drafting the proclamation as related by Thomas T. Eckert in David Homer Bates’s Lincoln in the Telegraph Office is improbable. See Matthew Pinsker, Lincoln’s Sanctuary,* 41.

²⁴⁹ William Whiting, The War Powers of the President, and the Legislative Powers of Congress in Relation to Rebellion, Treason and Slavery (Boston: Shorely, 1862), 58.

next he speaks in relation to this defiant and ungrateful villainy it will be with no uncertain sound.”²⁵⁰

The following day, the president summoned his cabinet for an unusual Monday meeting. Chase recorded that Lincoln “had been profoundly concerned at the present aspect of affairs, and had determined to take some definitive steps in respect to military action and slavery.” But instead of springing his proclamation on the cabinet, Lincoln merely announced that he had prepared orders allowing commanders in the field to subsist their troops off the land in Confederate territory; authorizing the employment of blacks within Union lines as laborers; and providing for colonization of blacks overseas. These measures were discussed at length. When the use of blacks as troops came up, Lincoln expressed reservations and proposed to discuss that matter, along with the others, on the morrow.²⁵¹

That fateful day, July 22, the cabinet reconvened to continue discussion of the arming of blacks, which Chase heartily supported. The president demurred but added that he planned to issue a proclamation, based on the Second Confiscation Act, warning that all slaveholders who continued rebelling against the Union would have their property confiscated; declaring that he would once again urge Congress to renew its endorsement of his earlier offer of gradual, compensated emancipation; and reaffirming that the war was being fought to restore the Union. The final sentence of this brief document stated that “as a fit and necessary military measure for effecting this object [i.e., restoration of the Union] I, as Commander-in-Chief of the Army and Navy of the United States, do order and declare that on the first day of January in the year of Our Lord one thousand,

²⁵⁰ Hay to Mary Jay, Washington, 20 July 1862, in Burlingame, ed., At Lincoln’s Side, 23.

²⁵¹ Niven, ed., Chase Papers, 1:348 (diary entry for 21 July 1862).

eight hundred and sixtythree, all persons held as slaves within any state or states, wherein the constitutional authority of the United States shall not then be practically recognized, shall then, thenceforward and forever, be free.”²⁵² Lincoln explained that had “had resolved upon this step, and had not called them together to ask their advice, but to lay the subject-matter of a proclamation before them” and solicit suggestions.²⁵³

Surprisingly, the conservative Edward Bates agreed heartily. But he wanted colonization linked with emancipation. Long opposed to slavery, he hoped that the bondsmen would be freed and then emigrate. He voiced the widely held belief that the two races could not coexist without intermarriage, which would degrade whites without improving blacks.²⁵⁴

At the opposite end of the cabinet’s ideological spectrum, Chase approved in general but raised some objections. In his diary, the treasury secretary noted: “I said that I should give to such a measure my cordial support, but I should prefer that no new expression on the subject of compensation should be made, and I thought that the measure of Emancipation could be much better and more quietly accomplished by allowing Generals to organize and arm the slaves (thus avoiding depredation and massacre on the one hand, and support to the insurrection on the other) and by directing the Commanders of Departments to proclaim emancipation within their Districts as soon as practicable; but I regarded this as so much better than inaction on the subject, that I should give it my entire support.”²⁵⁵

²⁵² Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 5:336-37.

²⁵³ Carpenter, Six Months at the White House, 21.

²⁵⁴ Welles ep essay 242.*

²⁵⁵ Niven, ed., Chase Papers, 351 (diary entry for 22 July 1862).

(A week later, Chase clarified his objections in a letter to Benjamin F. Butler dealing with emancipation in the Lower South. He believed that slaves there should be liberated by generals like Butler: “military emancipation in the Gulf states will settle or largely contribute to settle the negro question in the free states. I am not myself afraid of the negroes. If they behave themselves and work industriously & honestly I have not the slightest objection to their contributing their industry to the prosperity of the state of which I am a citizen [Ohio] or to their being protected in their rights to life, liberty and pursuit of happiness by the same laws which protect me. But I know that many honest men really think that they are not to be permitted to reside in the northern states and I believe myself that if left free to choose most of them will prefer warmer climes to ours. Let therefore the south be opened to negro emigration by emancipation along the gulf and it is easy to see that the blacks of the north will slide southward and leave behind them no question to quarrel about so far as they are concerned.”)²⁵⁶

Stanton recorded a different version of Chase’s remarks. According to the war secretary, Chase “thinks [emancipation] a measure of great danger, and would lead to universal emancipation.”²⁵⁷ Astonished at the treasury secretary’s reservations, Lincoln exclaimed: “What! You Chase, the father of abolitionism, object!”²⁵⁸

Stanton himself favored the “immediate promulgation” of Lincoln’s decree.²⁵⁹ Blair, who arrived late, “deprecated that policy, on the ground that it would cost the

²⁵⁶ Niven, ed., Chase Papers, 3:236.

²⁵⁷ Stanton memo, 22 September 1862, Stanton Papers, Library of Congress.

²⁵⁸ Assistant Secretary of War Peter H. Watson told this to Benjamin Moran. Moran diary, 15 September 1873, Library of Congress.

²⁵⁹ Stanton memo, 22 September 1862, Stanton Papers, Library of Congress.

Administration the fall elections.”²⁶⁰ The conservative Caleb B. Smith did not voice an opinion at the meeting, but immediately afterward he told the assistant secretary of the interior that if Lincoln did issue an emancipation proclamation, “I will resign and go home and attack the administration.”²⁶¹ When no one else seemed willing to make suggestions, Seward offered what Stanton called “a long speech against its immediate promulgation.” According to the war secretary, Seward predicted that “foreign nations will intervene to prevent the abolition of slavery for [the] sake of cotton.” A proclamation “would break up our relations with foreign nations and the production of cotton for sixty years.”²⁶²

Lincoln recalled Seward’s remarks differently. To the artist Francis B. Carpenter, the president summarized the argument of his secretary of state: “I approve of the proclamation, but I question the expediency of its issue at this juncture. The depression of the public mind, consequent upon our repeated reverses, is so great that I fear the effect of so important a step. It may be viewed as a last measure of an exhausted government, a cry for help; the government stretching forth its hands to Ethiopia, instead of Ethiopia stretching forth her hands to the government.” Lincoln recollected that Seward’s “idea was that it would be considered our last shriek, on the retreat.” So, the Sage of Auburn argued, “while I approve the measure, I suggest, sir, that you postpone its issue, until you can give it to the country supported by military success, instead of issuing it, as would be the case now, upon the greatest disasters of the war!” (Seward boasted to a senator, “I

²⁶⁰ Carpenter, Six Months at the White House, 21.

²⁶¹ John Palmer Usher, President Lincoln’s Cabinet (Omaha: n.p., 1925), 17.

²⁶² Stanton memo, 22 September 1862, Stanton Papers, Library of Congress.

have done the state service, for I have prevented Mr. Lincoln from issuing an emancipation proclamation in the face of our retreating army.”²⁶³

Lincoln told Carpenter that Seward’s analysis “struck me with very great force. It was an aspect of the case that, in all my thought upon the subject, I had entirely overlooked. The result was that I put the draft of the proclamation aside, as you do your sketch for a picture, waiting for a victory. From time to time I added or changed a line, touching it up here and there, anxiously watching the progress of events.”²⁶⁴ For the next two months, those events would be unpropitious.

As July drew to an end, Charles Eliot Norton gave voice to questions that were preying on the minds of many in the North: “Will Lincoln be master of the opportunities, or will they escape him? Is he great enough for the time?”²⁶⁵

²⁶³ Washington correspondence by Van [D. W. Bartlett], 23 September, Springfield (Massachusetts) Republican, 27 September 1862.

²⁶⁴ Carpenter, Six Months at the White House, 21-22.

²⁶⁵ Norton to George William Curtis, Cambridge, 31 July 1862, Norton and Howe, eds., Letters of Norton, 1:255.