

The Age of Emancipating Proclamations: Early Civil War Abolitionism and Its Discontents

The simple way . . . to put an end to the savage and desolating war now waged by the slaveholders, is to strike down slavery itself, the primal cause of the war.

Frederick Douglass in *Douglass' Monthly*, May 1861

I would leave to my children the Union that our fathers left to us. . . . I do not wish to see a new St. Domingo on [my] southern border. These are my sentiments as a Pennsylvanian and a white man.

Congressman Charles Biddle, March 6, 1862

WELL BEFORE LINCOLN ISSUED any Emancipation Proclamation—preliminary or otherwise—Civil War Americans were involved in a robust debate about the broader social and ideological dimensions of black wartime freedom. Indeed, it is fair to say that even without the Great Emancipator's liberating deed, pre-1863 Americans would still have been engaged in the most serious discussion of emancipation since the postrevolutionary period. Much like the so-called "First Emancipation," when the exigencies of war and nation building compelled the founding generation of statesmen, reformers, and citizens to reexamine slavery's place in American life (culminating in a series of gradual abolition laws above the Mason-Dixon Line), pre-Proclamation emancipation debate flowed from a complex matrix of wartime concerns. Prompted by a half-dozen "emancipating proclamations," or proto-abolitionist edicts, issued by military and political officials during the first year and a half of sectional battle, this debate illuminated

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much more than strategic concerns of the moment. Rather, it reflected continuing concerns about black freedom in the United States.

Indeed, early wartime fears about black liberations large and small often flowed from antebellum discourses about race—and, more specifically, about the fruits of the First Emancipation. For many Unionists (including Pennsylvanians), early emancipation in the United States represented an unsuccessful experiment in black liberty, with generations of northern freedmen clinging to a perilous existence. Hardcore anti-abolitionists North and South pushed the matter further, arguing that global emancipation had failed from British Canada to the French Caribbean. As Pennsylvania Democrat Charles Biddle declared openly in March 1862, his concerns about black wartime liberty derived not only from constitutional scruples about Southern masters' property rights but his identity as a Northern "white man" who feared a future of racial discord in a nation full of ex-slaves—a prospect he compared unfavorably to rebellious Saint-Domingue.¹ Similarly, Indiana Democrat William Holman worried that Union confiscation policies alone presaged "fanatical" abolitionist schemes that would liberate hordes of Southern blacks who might oppress whites in and beyond Dixie.²

Both before and during the Civil War, abolitionists rejected such arguments, highlighting instead global emancipation success stories (including Haiti) and offering wide-ranging statistics on black educational uplift, community building, and philanthropy to make the case for a new birth of freedom in the United States.³ Whether supporting "contraband" and confiscation policies or broader freedom decrees by military figures, American abolitionists also vigorously defended each new emancipating proclamation of the early 1860s. But their views did not always win the day. Indeed, as abolitionists had long known, Biddle and Holman were far from alone. They spoke to, and for, a significant slice of Unionists who saw an ominous future in emancipation peace as well as wartime freedom. And of course, they did this well before Lincoln's grand emancipation edict ever saw the light of day.

¹ *The Alliance with the Negro: Speech of Hon. Charles J. Biddle of Pennsylvania, Delivered in the House of Representatives of the United States, March 6, 1862* (Washington, 1862), 8.

² See Holman's comments in *Cong. Globe*, 37th Cong., 2d Sess. appendix, 151–54 (May 23, 1862).

³ See especially Matthew J. Clavin, *Toussaint Louverture and the American Civil War: The Peril and Prospect of a Second Haitian Revolution* (Philadelphia, 2009).

So what happens when we focus exclusively on wartime emancipation debates before September of 1862? Just what did policy makers, reformers, and Abraham Lincoln himself learn during this intense micro-era of emancipation? If we step back and ask these questions, the coming of the Emancipation Proclamation seems anything but automatic or certain. Indeed, it is clear that wartime abolitionism was a hard, and highly contingent, road to travel, with the Emancipation Proclamation coming in many ways *despite* (not because of) early debate over black liberty.⁴

The Age of Emancipating Proclamations, Part 1: From Early Abolition to Abolition War?

The emancipating proclamations of the early war years offered a burst of abolitionism unseen in American life since the nation's founding. Between May 1861 and July 1862, Union political and military officials offered six significant freedom decrees of one kind or another: General Benjamin Butler's contraband edict in Virginia, two congressional confiscation acts, General John Fremont's Missouri proclamation of freedom, David Hunter's proclamation of freedom in the Department of the South, and compensated emancipation in the District of Columbia. In addition, early Civil War Americans debated diplomatic recognition of Haiti and Liberia, interdictions of the global slave trade, the status of the Fugitive Slave Law in Union territory, and the employment of enslaved people in federal installations, among other things. Taken individually, none of these acts (or debates) would be as sweeping as the Emancipation Proclamation. Yet, taken together, they formed a corpus of emancipation codes that impacted thousands of slaves and masters stretching across huge swaths of Confederate and Union territory. Here, numbers would tell only part of the tale, for while congressional Democrats and anti-abolitionists often asked for details about black liberation, they too realized that emancipation precedent mattered more—namely, the prospect of federal encroachment upon Southern slavery and what that might mean for the nation as a whole. Thus, whether they became official policy

⁴ There is no shortage of great work on the Emancipation Proclamation. For the most recent studies, see Louis P. Masur, *Lincoln's Hundred Days* (Cambridge, MA, 2012); and James Oakes, *Freedom National: The Destruction of Slavery in the United States, 1861–1865* (New York, 2012). See also these award-winning books: Eric Foner, *The Fiery Trail: Abraham Lincoln and American Slavery* (New York, 2010); and Allen C. Guelzo, *Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation: The End of Slavery in America* (New York, 2004).

or not, early emancipating proclamations engendered much broader societal debate over black wartime freedom.

This first act of Civil War freedom, halting and incomplete as it was, paled in comparison to what would happen between 1863 and 1870. But that is not the way early Civil War figures would see it. From the perspective of the broad abolitionist past—in which most Americans agreed that southern bondage must never be touched by federal hands—each new freedom decree of the early 1860s represented a potentially big step forward. The only thing that matched it was the twenty-five-year period of postrevolutionary emancipation that slowly drained bondage from the North. Although Vermont gets credit for first banning bondage in its constitution of 1777, Pennsylvania's 1780 abolition act marked the beginning of an abolitionist heyday. As generations of scholars know, the Quaker State law did not free a single slave outright; only those born after the act had passed would be liberated at the age of twenty-eight. Worse, perhaps, in Pennsylvania and elsewhere many slaves were sold south before freedom came. Nevertheless, Pennsylvania's law bracketed a fruitful era of race reform; between 1780 and 1804, when New Jersey passed the last gradual abolition act before the Civil War era, every state above the Mason-Dixon Line crafted some antislavery law.⁵ With such abolitionist momentum in mind—including a wave of private manumissions and black freedom suits in the Chesapeake—historian Gary Nash has argued that the founders could have slain slavery altogether if they had pushed harder in the South.⁶

While new research on early abolitionism complicates that notion, Nash is right that the First Emancipation loomed large in national memory. Some Civil War statesmen referred to it as a benchmark of American freedom. For Radical Republicans, in fact, early abolitionism showed that federal officials must finish the founders' freedom struggle. According to a group of New Yorkers pressuring Congress to take decisive antislavery measures in 1862, Pennsylvania abolition illustrated that enlightened

⁵ On northern emancipation, see, among other works, David N. Gellman, *Emancipating New York: The Politics of Slavery and Freedom, 1777–1827* (Baton Rouge, LA, 2006); Joanne Pope Melish, *Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and "Race" in New England, 1780–1860* (Ithaca, NY, 1998); Gary B. Nash and Jean R. Soderlund, *Freedom by Degrees: Emancipation in Pennsylvania and Its Aftermath* (New York, 1991); and Richard S. Newman, *The Transformation of American Abolitionism: Fighting Slavery in the Early Republic* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2001).

⁶ See Nash, *Race and Revolution* (Lanham, MD, 1990). On Virginia's wave of private emancipation and black freedom suits, see Eva Sheppard Wolf, *Race and Liberty in the New Nation: Emancipation in Virginia from the Revolution to Nat Turner's Rebellion* (Baton Rouge, LA, 2006).

statesmen could use government policy to strike against bondage and secure national greatness.⁷ Massachusetts's George Livermore compiled an exhaustive list of "Opinions of the Founders" on "Negroes as Slaves, as Citizens, and as Soldiers," including John Jay's celebration of Pennsylvania abolitionism as a key part of the American future.⁸ For him and others, early emancipation worked but remained incomplete.

Yet many northerners as well as southerners argued that the First Emancipation had failed, most notably by creating the paradox of free blacks in a seemingly white republic. Pennsylvania's Charles Brown offered a representative summary of this view in an 1849 congressional speech, calling abolitionism nothing less than a brand of visionary fanaticism that fooled blacks into thinking they were equal to whites. "I know, in the South, the slaves are more contented in their position and happier than are the free negroes of the North," he observed. Even in Pennsylvania, Brown explained, white citizens had disenfranchised blacks and pushed them to the social margins. But in the South, where he watched Virginians debate and reject abolitionism in the 1830s, Brown believed that emancipation was simply "impracticable." Brown spoke for many when he asserted that bondage should be left in the "care of an overruling Providence" as well as "the states where slavery exists."⁹

When the Civil War began, virtually all officials agreed that under the Constitution, slavery was off limits in the states where it already existed. Nevertheless, when General Benjamin Butler launched the war's first formal emancipation volley in late May of 1861 with his declaration that fugitive slaves would not be returned to their masters (the Northern equivalent of firing on Fort Sumter), some Unionists saw abolitionism on the horizon—though that might not be a good thing. Abraham Lincoln's secretary John Hay noted that only weeks after the president called for seventy-five thousand Union soldiers in April 1861, fellow Republican Carl Schurz "loafed" into his office to discuss "the slaves & their ominous discontent." With fugitives already infiltrating Union lines, Unionists wondered what to do. Hay felt that the "madness" of Southern rebellion

⁷ *The Privilege and Dignity, Responsibility and Duty of the Present Congress, to Emancipate the Slaves by Law* (New York, 1864).

⁸ George Livermore, *An Historical Research Respecting the Opinions of the Founders of the Republic on Negroes as Slaves, as Citizens, and as Soldiers. Read before the Massachusetts Historical Society, August 14, 1862* (Boston, 1862), 46.

⁹ Brown speech on "Abolition and Slavery," in *Cong. Globe*, 30th Cong. 2d Sess. 117–19 (Feb. 19, 1849), quote at 119.

offered an emancipation moment that would otherwise have taken “many lifetimes” to achieve. But after hearing abolitionists brag about black liberation, Hay reconsidered. Fearful of servile war, Hay wrote in his diary that “this is not the time” to stir the cauldron of emancipation.¹⁰ For their part, Southern masters began moving slaves away from Union lines, concerned that their bondsmen would flee to so-called “Black Republicans” who, according to secessionist warnings dating back to the election of 1856, eagerly sought to stir slave discord and rebellion.

Theory turned to reality after three enslaved Virginians (named Mallory, Townsend, and Baker) escaped to Fort Monroe, a federal redoubt on the Virginia coast near Hampton Roads.¹¹ While their arrival was hardly a surprise—northerners had been dealing with southern fugitives since Pennsylvania abolitionism in the 1780s—the skillful way that they shaped their escape narrative was new, and it offered a powerful way to envision ad hoc wartime black liberty. As the black men explained, they had been building Confederate fortifications in Virginia and would soon be transferred to North Carolina for further war work. The lawyerly Butler used these details to argue that slaves must be seized as contraband property. When Union brass (including Lincoln) let the order stand, some Americans cheered. According to the *Christian Recorder*, a black periodical based in Philadelphia, Butler’s edict constituted one of the “grand movements of history.”¹²

While the overwhelming majority of Unionists rejected such views, black and white abolitionists hailed Butler as a liberator. The black press led the way, viewing Butler as a representative New Northerner: a federal official who did not avoid wartime abolitionism. Ingeniously inverting the story of Exodus, which had been African Americans’ favorite biblical text for its depictions of a righteous God who struck down recalcitrant Egyptian masters, black writers pictured Butler as an enlightened Pharaoh who heeded Moses’s call: “let my people go.” From his Rochester base, Frederick Douglass illuminated Butler’s righteous power. After a Virginia master demanded thirty parcels of his “live property” at Fort Monroe, Butler replied firmly that he would not return enslaved people

¹⁰ John Hay, diary entry, May 10, 1861, in *The Civil War: The First Year Told by Those Who Lived It*, ed. Brooks D. Simpson, Stephen W. Sears, and Aaron Sheehan-Dean (New York, 2011), 353–54.

¹¹ See Adam Goodheart, “Freedom’s Fortress,” chap. 8 in *1861: The Civil War Awakening* (New York, 2011).

¹² *Christian Recorder*, June 8, 1861.

unless they wanted to go back to bondage. Like a chorus, the enslaved flock shouted that “they preferred to remain with the soldiers in the Fort.” “Finding himself in a bad fix,” the master “manumitted the thirty slaves on the spot [and] left them in the fort free men.”¹³

A nearly fairy-tale version of blacks’ flight to freedom, Douglass’s account reversed the reality of rendition haunting many antebellum run-aways. With Butler’s decisive action, the *Christian Recorder* claimed, secession would “bring with it results altogether different from those contemplated by its authors and principal agents [Northern Unionists]”: slavery’s destruction, not its protection. In fact, it reported, “fugitive slaves are already flying in considerable numbers” to federal forts. To emphasize Butler’s status as a great liberator, the *Christian Recorder* informed readers that the general “refuses to return [slaves] to bondage.”¹⁴ With its national network of correspondents and subscribers, the *Christian Recorder* spread word of Butler’s edict far and wide. Little wonder that from May 1861 onward, Fort Monroe became a black sacred site and a magnet for thousands of blacks running to freedom.

In Butler, black and white reformers crafted a usable symbol of emancipation—a prospective abolitionist leader who rarely, if ever, existed in American statecraft. Yet Butler’s decree did not define federal policy until August 1861, when the First Confiscation Act took effect.¹⁵ Passed in the wake of Union disaster at Bull Run, the law formalized Butler’s order by allowing Northern military forces to confiscate property used to support Confederate rebellion, including “persons held to service.” Predictably, slaveholders—Union and Confederate—howled. Kentuckian John Crittenden, the would-be compromiser who had so recently pushed Congress to forever protect Southern slavery via amendment (it died amid the war), thought that confiscation shattered antebellum slavery protections. Others worried that confiscation turned slaves and white citizens, not merely military officials, into mini-liberators who would use deceit to label loyal masters as Confederate rebels (resulting in a loss of their slaves). Many political and military figures favored General George McClellan’s edict prohibiting Union attacks on masters’ property.¹⁶

¹³ *Douglass’ Monthly*, July 1861.

¹⁴ *Christian Recorder*, June 8, 1861.

¹⁵ See John Syrett, *The Civil War Confiscation Acts: Failing to Reconstruct the South* (New York, 2005).

¹⁶ See Stephen W. Sears, “Lincoln and McClellan,” in *Lincoln’s Generals*, ed. Gabor S. Boritt (New York, 1994), 9.

Confiscation's opponents—among whom were many Northerners—also sounded alarm bells about black freedom.¹⁷ Almost immediately, white Northerners expressed concern about “sudden” emancipation, a term they used again and again. Though the stalwart *Philadelphia Inquirer* argued that secessionists should be prepared to lose bondage as a price of rebellion, it worried about the “sudden emancipation” of millions of “semi-savages” inside Union lines. In Franklin County, on Pennsylvania's southern border, another paper argued that confiscation had already set Southern blacks “adrift.” Even without a mass emancipation decree, the *Valley Spirit* wrote, confiscation remained disconcerting to Northerners. Indeed, by June of the following year, the paper stoked racial animosity by reporting that contrabands received better treatment than whites. With confiscation and contraband policies, the Union was truly topsy-turvy.¹⁸

Throughout the summer and fall of 1861, Northerners continued to debate the social meaning of the “Contraband Question,” often in ways that caused abolitionists chagrin. As Charles Biddle soon put it, the contraband question had become a “Negro question,” and thus the vehicle for discussions about the national implications of Southern liberation. Pennsylvania was a battleground state, as several newspapers argued against letting freed blacks come north. Building on years of colonizationist support, a Chambersburg paper suggested sending “contrabands” to Haiti to “quiet any sensitiveness in relation to [a] too sudden and great increase in our free Negro population.” After the First Confiscation Act took effect, the paper urged putting “contrabands in Indian country,” thus preventing freed blacks from wallowing in “idleness” up north. Better to simply return wartime fugitives to their masters.¹⁹

Contraband images illuminated many white Unionists' ambivalence about tactical black liberation. Minstrelized depictions of “contraband” blacks saturated Northern newspapers, broadsides, and even envelopes. Yet they rested on antebellum caricatures of African Americans as shiftless simpletons unprepared for freedom. With Fort Monroe as the frequent reference point, a series of Union envelope images depicted escaped

¹⁷ *Christian Recorder*, Aug. 24, 1861. The article deals with Butler's policy but alludes to confiscation as a problematic issue.

¹⁸ See *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Oct. 4, 1861; *Franklin County (PA) Valley Spirit*, Nov. 27, 1861, and June 11, 1862.

¹⁹ Biddle, *Alliance with the Negro*, 1–2; *Franklin County (PA) Semiweekly Dispatch*, June 28, 1861, and Dec. 31, 1861; Biddle also quoted in *Valley Spirit*, Apr. 2, 1862.

blacks as devilish figures whose flight undermined the Confederacy. “Come back here you black rascal,” a slaveholder yelled in one frequently circulated image. “Oh! No—I can’t Combe back[,] ‘Ise contraban,” the enslaved person replies in a raw dialect as he and his family run to Fort Monroe. But Butler’s contraband policy heralded problems for white Northerners too: “ebony black” men who wanted not just freedom but equality. In early 1862, the *Philadelphia Inquirer* noted that contraband “charity” cases continued to rise throughout the Union even as white families suffered. As “Music by the ‘Contra-Band,” a famous image published in the summer of 1861, indicated, freed blacks seemed to prefer dancing a jig to anything else. As much as they poked fun at slaveholders, then, contraband images stigmatized blacks as potentially uncontrollable beyond bondage. And, the *Philadelphia Inquirer* noted in April 1862, contrabands “are [still] going North.”²⁰

While white and black abolitionists battled back against these depictions, they could not overturn the prevailing image of freed blacks as a social problem. One Pennsylvania newspaper editor laughed that abolitionists now delighted in definitions of blacks as property, when for years they argued otherwise; what, the editor mockingly asked—would white Unionists treat them as equals?²¹ George McHenry, the former director of Philadelphia’s Board of Trade before moving to London and becoming a Confederate sympathizer, hoped not, arguing that the First Emancipation proved the futility of black freedom. From the mid-Atlantic to the Midwest, according to McHenry, early abolitionism had produced black paupers and criminals. In abolition’s first home of Pennsylvania, free blacks had become “a degraded class much deteriorated by freedom.” For him, blacks were simply “not industrious,” and freedom only made things worse.²²

McHenry was part of a vigilant anti-abolitionist sector of Northern society that arose as soon as the war started. Standing vocally against any and all attempts to turn the Union war into an abolitionist crusade, these emancipation critics were often identified with the Democratic Party. Powerful bands of anti-abolitionist statesmen at the local, state, and federal levels appeared in New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, and

²⁰ Civil War Envelope Collection, John A. McAllister Collection, Library Company of Philadelphia; *Philadelphia Inquirer*, June 29, 1861, Jan. 14, 1862, and Apr. 18, 1862.

²¹ *Valley Spirit*, Nov. 27, 1861.

²² George McHenry, *Position and Duty of Pennsylvania: A Letter Addressed to the President of the Philadelphia Board of Trade* (London, 1863), 72.

Illinois—a white belt in which economic and cultural beliefs merged into a discourse about protecting the North from “black Republican” heresy. In Pennsylvania, networks of anti-abolitionists stretched from big cities to small towns. The *Clearfield Republican*, a Democratic organ published in central Pennsylvania, spoke for many people when it worried about “abolitionized Republicanism” even before Lincoln was elected. With Lincolmites believing in the “irrepressible conflict” thesis that slavery must be vanquished, the paper saw a Republican victory as anathema to white northerners. And make no mistake, the paper noted in October 1860, if emancipation succeeded in the South, “four millions of ignorant and uncontrolled Negroes” would soon flood the North, competing with white workers for jobs and worse.²³

For that reason, the black press defended proto-emancipation policies such as confiscation at every turn. Realizing that early Civil War debates over black freedom simultaneously looked backward to the First Emancipation and forward to the prospect of African American liberty in the 1860s, black writers argued that even small Civil War liberations had proven to be successful. In the summer of 1861, Frederick Douglass hailed contraband contributions to the Union cause: “At Fortress Monroe the ebony contrabands are everywhere to be seen in large numbers, and [they] make themselves generally useful.” Out west in Illinois, Douglass reported, “slaves are coming to the camps of the soldiers every day, and are immediately set to work upon the fortifications.”²⁴ By underlining enslaved peoples’ industriousness, piety, and geniality, Douglass sought to neutralize worries of racial friction (or worse, race war) that had haunted abolitionism for years. The *Christian Recorder* reprinted Edward Pierce’s famous analysis of enslaved peoples’ contributions to the Union cause. Entitled “Experience among the Contrabands,” Pierce’s essay offered “sketches of [liberated blacks’] character and habits” in Union-controlled South Carolina. Originally published in the *Atlantic Monthly*, the article examined contrabands’ morality, religion, character, and industriousness—longstanding talking points in debates over American emancipation. With white Northerners’ guidance, Pierce argued, freed blacks would easily transition to new labor and social systems.²⁵

²³ *Clearfield (PA) Republican*, Oct. 10, 1860.

²⁴ *Douglass’ Monthly*, July 1861.

²⁵ *Christian Recorder*, Nov. 23, 1861.

Part of a genre that examined blacks' fitness for freedom dating back to the eighteenth-century North, Pierce's essay offered a bold reminder that the emancipating proclamations of 1861 and 1862 reprised old debates in new ways. Indeed, with contraband policies creating mini-liberations in Confederate territory, wartime emancipation was no distant possibility. When the *Christian Recorder* wrote that roughly fifteen thousand freed slaves lived off the coast of South Carolina, perceptive readers knew that this number surpassed most northern emancipations and far exceeded recalcitrant Delaware's tiny slave population.²⁶ Both east and west, the hundreds of fugitive slaves arriving in any Union camp in one year equaled the entire number of runaways passing through Philadelphia in the whole decade before the Civil War.²⁷ The question in 1861–62, no less than the 1780s and 1790s, was this: what did black freedom mean? Drawing on a black abolitionist discourse from the founding years, Frederick Douglass linked abolitionism and equality. But he worried that Union officials would go no further than piecemeal liberation policies that left blacks as stateless refugees.²⁸ Democrats' references to freed blacks as "Africans"—that is, people with no connection to US citizenship—certainly abetted Douglass's case.²⁹

Just as bad, as the *Christian Recorder* reported, some Union generals refused to offer fugitives sanctuary, no matter congressional policy. Radical Republicans' inability to get Congress to condemn them augured ill for abolitionism. In December 1861, for instance, House Republicans failed to pass a resolution censuring General Henry Halleck for turning away fugitive slaves. Moving from language that "required" Halleck to reverse course to a "request" that he do so, Illinois representative Owen Lovejoy tried in vain to convince his colleagues to hammer Halleck.³⁰ For some Republicans no less than Democrats, however, Lovejoy's resolution was another step toward a broad emancipation war they did not yet want.

²⁶ *Christian Recorder*, Oct. 11, 1862.

²⁷ See *Douglass' Monthly*, July and Dec. 1861.

²⁸ *Douglass' Monthly*, Oct. 1861.

²⁹ As one example, see Democrat Samuel Cox of Ohio's House resolution seeking "the number, age, and condition of the Africans" at Fort Monroe, *Journal of the House of Representatives*, 37th Cong., 2d Sess. 416 (Mar. 7, 1862).

³⁰ *Journal of the House of Representatives*, 37th Cong., 2d Sess. 48–51 (Dec. 9, 1861).

The Age of Emancipating Proclamations, Part 2: "Bold Acts"

By autumn 1861, the stakes of Union policy had been raised by General John Fremont's emancipation decree. After declaring martial law in Missouri, a border Union state riven by Confederate and Union loyalties, Fremont asserted that slaves of rebel masters there would be "declared freemen." Like Butler, Fremont used the prospect of black freedom to cut down rebel strength. But Fremont's action was also proactive—it decreed black liberty from afar. It broadcast the message that if you rebelled, by definition your slaves deserved freedom.³¹

Like subsequent emancipation proclamations, Fremont's order could be read as legalistic and limited. But for many black activists, that hardly mattered, for Fremont's proclamation broke through the sacred concept of property rights in man that marred even contraband and confiscation policies. Indeed, using the word "freeman" instead of "contraband," Fremont offered a nod to blacks' inherent humanity and equality. Using sacred as well as secular language, African Americans celebrated Fremont as another biblical prophet who had righted human wrongs. When word leaked that Fremont's aide-de-camp was the son-in-law of the great Philadelphia abolitionist Lucretia Mott, the Pathfinder's emancipation policy appeared heroic. Here was an act based on principle, not just politics. The *Christian Recorder* called it simply a "bold act" and the new standard of wartime liberty.³²

Black abolitionists' support for Fremont was shaped by years of struggle with abolitionist patrons, many of whom agreed that Southern masters had constitutional rights in man.³³ But here was a true liberator, one who did not haggle over white rebels' wartime rights. For reformers (and even some Union soldiers), Fremont's proclamation proved significant for another reason: it moved emancipation debates out of the congressional realm, where anti-abolitionist Democrats could scuttle black liberation policies through all manner of parliamentary procedure.³⁴ Fremont's call

³¹ *Christian Recorder*, Sept. 7, 1861.

³² See Henry Mayer, *All on Fire: William Lloyd Garrison and the Abolition of Slavery* (New York, 1998), 527; *Christian Recorder*, Sept. 28, 1861.

³³ See Newman, "Creating Free Spaces: Blacks and Abolitionist Activism in Pennsylvania Courts, 1780s–1830s," chap. 3 in *Transformation of American Abolitionism*.

³⁴ See Chandra Manning, *What This Cruel War Was Over: Soldiers, Slavery, and the Civil War* (New York, 2007), 46–47.

to arms harkened back to the Declaration of Independence, offering a clear rebuke to slaveholding and slaveholders.

But Fremont's proclamation also brought swift rebuke from the Union war machine, including a countermanding order from Lincoln. Unlike Butler's contraband decision, which the administration supported as a wartime tactic, Fremont's order flirted with broad abolitionism, which might alienate border South states altogether. With over one hundred thousand Missouri slaves, perhaps a third of whom belonged to rebel masters, Fremont's edict was a big abolitionist stroke—encompassing at least as many enslaved people as the entire First Emancipation.³⁵ Lincoln also worried about reactions from Northern whites. As Charles Biddle noted in 1862, emancipating proclamations such as Fremont's turned the war into something much less palatable to “border” Northerners.³⁶

The abolitionist press read Lincoln's revocation of Fremont's emancipation edict as a fearful concession to both slaveholders and anti-abolitionist Northerners. For Douglass, Fremont rhymed with freedom while Lincoln paired perfectly with slavery. “The lawyer has prevailed over the warrior,” Douglass lamented, noting that Lincoln objected not to martial law per se but to Fremont's “emancipating clause.” Still, Douglass declared, Fremont's proclamation remained “the most important document which has yet appeared in the progress of the war.” There was “no middle ground” anymore, he explained. The question now was this: should enslaved people be considered “friends or enemies?”³⁷

Military men debated Douglass's point. All along the thousand-mile front, Unionists wondered about emancipation as a day-to-day issue. In the trans-Mississippi theater, General William Tecumseh Sherman found himself besieged by fugitives. With nearly a thousand contrabands in camp by the middle of 1862, Sherman shrewdly used black labor to fortify his army. But he refused to grant fugitives final freedom. Other generals issued manumission papers—a policy Sherman decried as taking away loyal slaveholders' rights. Despite the passage of contraband and confiscation edicts, Sherman thought that decisions on blacks' ultimate freedom would have to come from on high.³⁸

³⁵ On debates over emancipation in Missouri, see especially Adam Arenson, *The Great Heart of the Republic: St. Louis and the Cultural Civil War* (Cambridge, MA, 2011).

³⁶ Biddle, *Alliance with the Negro*, 8.

³⁷ *Christian Recorder*, Sept. 28, 1861; *Douglass' Monthly*, Oct. and Nov. 1861.

³⁸ Sherman to Ellen Ewing Sherman, July 31, 1862, and Sherman to Gideon J. Pillow, Aug. 14, 1862, in *Sherman's Civil War: The Selected Correspondence of William Tecumseh Sherman*, ed. Brooks D. Simpson and Jean V. Berlin (Chapel Hill, NC, 1999), 260–61, and 274–75.

When General David Hunter issued his own emancipating proclamation on May 9, 1862, he prompted further debate about broad black freedom. As head of the Department of the South, which encompassed Georgia, Florida, and South Carolina, Hunter declared martial law. Like Fremont, he linked his order to wartime abolitionism, for, “martial law and slavery being incompatible,” as he put it, slaves of rebels would be “forever free.” An overjoyed William Lloyd Garrison noted that Hunter’s order impacted roughly a quarter of the South’s slaves, making it the greatest single emancipation proclamation in the Western world since British (compensated) emancipation in the 1830s. Abolitionists celebrated Hunter as someone who had learned the right lessons from northern emancipation. The *Christian Recorder* noted that Hunter, born in New Jersey and reared in the shadow of Pennsylvania abolition, was an unsurprising emancipator. (The paper had started keeping a tally of Union generals’ birthplaces). For A.M.E. bishop Henry Turner, Hunter’s upbringing paled next to his transcendent order, which, “in one sweeping proclamation, over which angels rejoice, declared the mystic Israelites free throughout South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida.”³⁹ Though again legalistic and limited, Hunter’s proclamation seemed glorious to blacks.

Like Fremont, too, Hunter had to grapple with the higher political power and concerns of the president. Worried about losing control over any emancipation process and ceding policy making to generals, Lincoln issued a counterproclamation asserting that “neither General Hunter nor any other commander or person has been authorized by the Government . . . to make proclamation declaring the slaves of any state free.” An outraged Garrison called Lincoln’s “veto” of Hunter “weak” and “pitiable.”⁴⁰ Drawing on arguments made by former president John Quincy Adams in the 1830s and 1840s that the federal government—especially the president, as commander in chief—had the power to emancipate slaves in times of national peril, he argued that General Hunter no less than President Lincoln had the wartime right to suppress Confederate rebellion by liberating Southern slaves.⁴¹ By countermanding Hunter, Lincoln shrank from a great emancipation moment. Bishop Turner compared Lincoln to the condemned Egyptian Pharaoh who “hardened his heart”

³⁹ *Christian Recorder*, July 1862.

⁴⁰ *Liberator*, May 23, 1862.

⁴¹ Guelzo, *Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation*, 126.

and ignored God.⁴² Once again, black and white abolitionists thought they had found the next great emancipator. Once again, they were disappointed by the president.

Ironically, both Lincoln and federal officials had scored some points among abolitionists with the District of Columbia emancipation edict the month before Hunter's proclamation. Since the 1820s, abolitionists had targeted the District as a legitimate field for congressional abolition. Even if Southern slaveholders had constitutional rights, abolitionists argued, the District was federal property without such protections. Throughout the antebellum era, such arguments failed to win many political converts. War changed congressional dynamics and made District abolition possible. It also prompted concern about a new age of federal emancipation. As David Wilmot, the famous Pennsylvania Democrat-turned-Republican, argued, District abolition was an "emancipation" in every sense of the word, freeing slaves and Congress from the restraints of the past.⁴³ Liberating nearly three thousand bondspeople, it was, as others rejoiced, "an example to all the land"—a reference to Leviticus: "Proclaim Freedom throughout the land unto all the inhabitants thereof."⁴⁴ Even black abolitionists, who preferred big military proclamations such as Fremont's, celebrated District abolition. In Boston, a special meeting of black reformers "tender[ed] to Congress and the President our heartfelt thanks for this act which frees the National Capital from the curse and sin of slavery."⁴⁵

Opponents believed that District emancipation violated the tenets of white democracy by not allowing masters a vote on the law. The specter of role reversal lurked behind such critiques, as anti-abolitionists compared white masters to enslaved members of a seemingly new body politic. Critics maintained that Unionist Marylanders and Virginians whose states had ceded District property in the postrevolutionary era should not be treated as mere "vassals" to Northern abolitionists. A Pittsburgh paper noted that the lesson of the hour was not bolder emancipation orders by faraway federal powers but more sensitivity to state and local peculiarities and rights. Returning to Pennsylvania's 1780 emanci-

⁴² *Christian Recorder*, July 12, 1862.

⁴³ David Wilmot, quoted in *Philadelphia Press*, May 5, 1862.

⁴⁴ Kate Masur, *An Example for All the Land: Emancipation and the Struggle over Equality in Washington, DC* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2010).

⁴⁵ Meeting and resolutions of Black Bostonians, May 12, 1862, reprinted in *Liberator*, May 23, 1862.

pation law, it noted that early abolitionism had been sanctioned by the Quaker State's white citizens.⁴⁶ Southern slaveholders deserved the same respect. A Lancaster, Pennsylvania, newspaper conjured Stephen A. Douglas to make just this point, noting that the recently departed Little Giant had rightly argued against District abolition. The source of that argument? The Lincoln-Douglas debates of 1858, which propelled Douglas to a Senate win. This proved that Americans rejected federal emancipation. In fact, the paper asserted, Lincoln—a vowed nonextensionist rather than emancipator—should prove his true Union colors by vetoing District abolition altogether.⁴⁷

When Congress began debating a stronger confiscation act in early 1862, essentially mandating that military officers attack bondage, Democrats often made this point. Taking slave property away from masters without due process or a referendum violated the Constitution. The precedent, as much as the policy, was poisonous, especially if reunion with Southern seceders remained the government's highest priority. When the Second Confiscation Act passed in July, not only solidifying contraband policies but paving the way for both broader emancipation decrees and black military contributions, a year of bold federal action seemed nearly complete to many Democrats. To them, the war for Union looked increasingly like an abolition war—a point they were eager to make in the midterm elections of 1862.

*The Meaning of Limited Emancipation War, 1861–62: More
Race Debate in the North*

Within a year of the firing on Fort Sumter, contrabands, confiscation, and emancipation decrees became linked in the minds of some Republicans as a great triumvirate of shifting wartime policy. Indiana's George Julian offered a remarkable summary of the way that "confiscation and liberation" had reversed the fortunes of war. Speaking in the Senate in April 1862, Julian noted that "the slave power" was a political fact of life during the early republic. "I rejoice now to find events all drifting in a different direction," he happily continued. Indeed, "slavery is not much longer to be spared." From the initial contraband policy, which shielded fugitive slaves from Confederate rendition, to the First Confiscation Act,

⁴⁶ *Pittsburgh Presbyterian Banner*, Mar. 29, 1862.

⁴⁷ *Lancaster (PA) Intelligencer*, Apr. 8, 1862.

which targeted bondage as a legitimate part of wartime policy, the Union had “given freedom to multitudes of slaves.” As important, the emancipating proclamations of Fremont and Hunter, though rescinded, made broad antislavery policy a firm topic of discussion. In fact, they had convinced Lincoln that “freedom to the slaves” would be fully warranted if the rebellion did not end soon. “Our watchwords,” he confidently predicted, “are now freedom, progress.”⁴⁸

With Julian’s optimistic rendering of events, the next step seems almost logical: Lincoln’s preliminary emancipation edict. However, given the First Emancipation’s contested history during the early war years, and the social/political debate already generated by proto-abolitionist wartime policies, the next step for Union powerbrokers was anything but preordained. With a series of emancipation edicts already having been issued, debated, overturned, and rethought in such a compressed period—and with thousands of former slaves already in quasi-free status in Union camps and federal territory—many Civil War statesmen wanted time to reflect. In Congress throughout early 1862, political officials sought updates on the results of black liberation policies: the number of blacks freed on the military front, where they went, and who was paying for their support. Far from mere wartime concerns about runaway slaves and out-sized military budgets, these calls harkened back to revolutionary-era fears that gradual emancipation would create a dependent class of black freedmen who would bloat northern state budgets. In dismantling bondage, as Joanne Melish has written of New England emancipation, early northern officials also worried about black dependency on the state, broadly conceived. Rather than belonging to individuals, blacks would now be the “slaves of the community.”⁴⁹ That meant that black freedom itself was viewed by early white liberators as not merely glorious but destabilizing. In short, while whites might enjoy unbridled freedom, black liberty carried with it inherent stigmas and concerns—especially that of dependency.

Drawing on this discourse in the Civil War, Union politicians and citizens alike argued that by 1862 too much emancipation had already occurred. The *Presbyterian Banner*, published out of Pittsburgh, stigmatized early Civil War abolitionists as neo-Jacobins whose visionary

⁴⁸ *Confiscation and Liberation: Speech of Hon. George W. Julian, of Indiana, in the House of Representatives, Friday, May 23, 1862* (Washington, 1862), 6.

⁴⁹ See especially Melish, *Disowning Slavery*, chaps. 2–3 and 5; quote at 84.

schemes of human equality would sink reunion efforts.⁵⁰ While sympathetic to antislavery principles, the paper could not countenance calls for “sudden” emancipation in the South, nor could it condone policies that put black freedom on par with Unionism. As proto-emancipation edicts piled up, anti-abolitionists worried that the Union might win the war but then lose the white republic altogether. The result of emancipation, according to one Northerner’s self-described “Anti-Abolitionist” pamphlet in 1862, would be nothing less than a rise in black crime and “pauperism” in the North, as freed blacks streamed across the Mason-Dixon Line.⁵¹

As black abolitionists noted, many white Northerners still seemed frozen by the question long associated with American emancipation: “what would become of the slaves”? The most sagacious philosophers stumbled on this matter, Bishop Henry Turner of the A.M.E. Church suggested, with Northerners as well as Southerners arguing that “the Negro can [not] live outside slavery.” According to Bishop Turner, “northern proslavery men have done the free people of color tenfold more injury than the southern slaveholders.”⁵² White concerns about abolition war reverberated across the Atlantic where an Irish lawyer sympathetic to the Union wrote alarmingly that “the bugbear of ‘premature emancipation’ is fast becoming to the popular mind more frightful than the fact of ripe and flourishing slavery.” For Confederates and anti-abolitionist Northerners alike, ad hoc military emancipation ranked with “the most horrible crime.” Democrats, in particular, reviled abolitionist policies, insisting that they would have “no emancipation, no confiscation, no murders in cold blood” by liberated bondmen.⁵³

Continued race debate in the North (and West) helps explain why wartime abolitionists were often on the defensive. Too few Northerners saw black freedom as desirable or workable on a national scale. For many whites, black liberty was a wartime tactic carefully contained. Pure abolitionism remained “visionary,” “fanatical,” and something to be avoided. Here, Democrat James McDougall offers a useful view of what emancipationists were up against in early 1862. A California lawyer who had lived in Illinois, McDougall was no border state rabble-rouser (though he

⁵⁰ *Presbyterian Banner*, Mar. 29, 1862.

⁵¹ J. H. Van Evrie, *Free Niggerism* (New York, 1862), 1.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ John Elliott Cairnes, *Revolution in America: A Lecture* (Dublin, Ire., 1862), 15–17; quote at 16.

enjoyed his alcohol a bit too much). Unlike some Democrats, whose complaints about military costs served as a means to undercut expansive Union war aims, McDougall believed that Congress should fund all debts incurred to save the republic.

But McDougall saw abolition differently. As he argued in an underappreciated Senate speech in March, a proposed new confiscation law that virtually commanded federal officials to seize rebel property, and (as congressional journals put it) “free the slaves,” seemed to turn the Union war into a battle for both black liberation and white subjugation. Not even colonization, which was written into the proposed confiscation law, could save the white republic from ruin if Southern abolition resulted. Though no friend of bondage, he thought emancipation was a “wild” and “visionary” plan. As he noted sadly, eerily prefiguring Lincoln’s colonization lecture to black leaders later that year, the Civil War had already cut white brotherhood into pieces. But for “the agitation of the negro question,” he observed, “there would have been no disturbance in this country, and we should have been a brotherhood as a nation to-day.”⁵⁴ In the winter and spring of 1862, McDougall opposed stronger confiscation edicts, District emancipation, and the move toward even a limited abolition war.

McDougall was no fire-breathing racist. Indeed, he channeled the anti-abolitionist views of many Northern politicians, military leaders, and citizens who saw emancipation as a problematic part of America’s past; for them, Southern liberation must not burden the nation’s future.⁵⁵ On this score, no one did more to stoke wartime anti-abolitionism than the infamous J. H. Van Evrie of New York. A medical man who popularized notions of black inferiority, Dr. Van Evrie also ran a publishing house in New York that circulated a series of “Anti-Abolition” pamphlets, books and treatises detailing the horrors of global emancipation. Looking back to the First Emancipation, and across the Atlantic world to other black freedom decrees, Van Evrie saw only regret and ruin. For him, abolitionism was unnatural and unworkable everywhere it had been tried. With titles ranging from the scientific (“An American Ethnological View of the Negro Question”) to the sensational (“Free Niggerism”), the doctor became a household name for people worried about abolitionist ascen-

⁵⁴ James McDougall, Senate speech on “Confiscation of Property,” Cong. Globe, 37th Cong., 2d Sess. 65, 67 (Mar. 3–4, 1862).

⁵⁵ See Jennifer L. Weber, *Copperheads: The Rise and Fall of Lincoln’s Opponents in the North* (New York, 2006).

dancy. No less a figure than Jefferson Davis hailed Van Evrie's work as "an able and manly exposure of a fallacy, which more than all other causes has disturbed the tranquility of our people": Northern abolitionism.⁵⁶

New York and Pennsylvania became key markets for Van Evrie's work precisely because they had large white working-class populations living in metropolitan areas with large free black populations borne of the First Emancipation. Terrified by the prospect of "sudden" emancipation, urban Democrats vilified "black Republicanism" in all its forms. But Van Evrie's work penetrated the countryside too. For editors on Pennsylvania's southern borderland, for instance, his exposé of "emancipation's failures" in early national America was revealing. "The public have long needed a concise history of the results of emancipation," one paper noted, and the good doctor had delivered it. "Farmers, mechanics, and all white laboring men are deeply interested in understanding the subject," especially in light of abolition's recent gains on the political and military fronts. Now, the editorialist insisted, the prospect of millions of freedmen liberated by an act of war must galvanize Northerners. Even more than secession, mass abolition would "ruin the country." For those reasons and more, he thought that Van Evrie's pamphlet deserved a wide readership. For years, echoes of this sentiment could be found in the central, western, and eastern parts of Pennsylvania.⁵⁷

By the late 1860s, Van Evrie's work stood as an ideological redoubt of anti-Reconstruction thought. But his views had been shaped years before the Great Emancipator did anything.

Countermanding Himself: The Emancipated Lincoln

Well before the fabled one hundred days between Lincoln's preliminary and final emancipation decrees, the wearied president understood that both Northerners and Southerners feared "sudden" emancipation, as Lincoln himself referred to it in his famous congressional message of March 1862. Recognizing that congressmen, abolitionists, military officials, white citizens, masters, enslaved people, and black activists had in just a short period of time covered nearly every possible way of seeing Civil War freedom—including whether or not the federal government

⁵⁶ The Davis blurb is found in an advertisement for Van Evrie's "An American Ethnological View of the Negro Question," printed in the *Philadelphia Press*, Feb. 2, 1861.

⁵⁷ *Lancaster Intelligencer*, June 24, 1862. See also the *Clearfield Republican*, Dec. 4, 1861.

and military had even the right to consider Southern emancipation—the president hardly had a clear way forward.⁵⁸

For that reason, he refrained from any “bold act” of emancipation for some time. And when he did broach abolition in early 1862, he did so in revealing ways. As he explained to Congress, Lincoln favored Pennsylvania-style gradualism as a way to soothe broader societal fears about black freedom, “because, in my opinion, gradual not sudden emancipation, is better for all.” Lincoln also wrote that wartime abolitionist measures must be both compensated and noncoercive, meaning that Southern states could use federal aid to take the “practical” abolitionist steps they themselves approved. And Lincoln was already on record as supporting colonization. Not only did he embrace it personally, he knew that debate over contraband and confiscation policies showed that many whites North and South would not even consider abolition without black expulsion. Lincoln had to conciliate anti-abolitionists as much as lecture proslavery forces. And still Lincoln failed.⁵⁹

His fruitless effort to convince skeptical politicians such as James McDougall speaks volumes about the conundrums of emancipation during the early war years. After reading McDougall’s fears of confiscation, the president outlined for the California senator the comparative costs of compensated emancipation versus continuing civil war.⁶⁰ Hoping to appeal to McDougall’s pragmatic side, Lincoln argued that gradual abolitionism made monetary sense. But McDougall (like others) continued to oppose wartime emancipation on social grounds. He could not see past black liberty. Lincoln’s gradual abolitionism, like so many other Union policies, was dangerous, or impracticable, or both. Where would ex-slaves go? What would they do? One might say that Lincoln’s words on another occasion fit well the position he faced in mid-1862: few wanted broad abolition (save radical reformers), many people deprecated it (North as well as South), and yet emancipation might well have to come as a Union-saving measure. In short, much like the abolitionist stalemate of the early 1800s, in which the contested gains of the First Emancipation

⁵⁸ Abraham Lincoln, “Message to Congress Recommending Compensated Emancipation,” Mar. 6, 1862, online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=70130>.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Lincoln to James McDougall, Mar. 14, 1862, original in Special Collections, University of Rochester Archives, Rochester, NY.

bogged down in fears about black liberation nationally, early wartime abolitionism stalled because of continuing racial fears.

Why, then, did Lincoln finally decide to issue his own abolition edicts when an anti-emancipation backlash prevailed and he had already countermanded broad military abolitionism? This remains the thorniest of questions for scholars of Lincoln and the Civil War.⁶¹ Was Lincoln being shrewd? Pragmatic? Desperate? With anti-emancipation forces North and South critiquing every abolitionist edict before the summer of 1862, Lincoln may have realized that he had to issue an executive emancipation order as a preemptive strike against Democrats and conservative Unionists. Knowing that Republicans would lose midterm seats to Democrats already talking about returning to the Union as it was, he wanted to slash slavery before opponents could gather more force (Democrats ended up gaining twenty-eight congressional seats in the November election). Recall too that Lincoln first thought about mass emancipation in June of 1862, after a springtime of Union disasters and political opposition to compensated abolition in the border states. From this admittedly provocative perspective, Lincoln reached for black freedom as much out of desperation as cool calculation.

But that should not limit appreciation of what he did. Every emancipation edict in 1861 and 1862 was borne of wartime necessity and framed as piecemeal policy. Only after 1863 (and, really, after the war) would national emancipation assume a providential status as the Union's saving grace and the Western world's grandest experiment in black freedom. Prior to 1863, no Civil War emancipation order did what even Pennsylvania's gradual abolition act had in 1780: declare abolitionism itself the patriotic "duty" of American statesmen.⁶² Like others, Lincoln tried but failed to incorporate abolitionism into the body politic as it was in early 1862, with colonization, compensation, and gradualism (hallmarks of every antebellum abolition debate) becoming key facets of his preferred emancipation vision. When his ideas did not win the day, Lincoln saw that the Union of old—and the abolitionist debates haunt-

⁶¹ Among many others recently weighing in, see Harold Holzer, Edna Greene Medford, and Frank J. Williams, eds., *The Emancipation Proclamation: Three Views* (Baton Rouge, LA, 2006). See also Michael Vorenberg's fine Bedford edition, *The Emancipation Proclamation: A Brief History with Documents* (New York, 2010).

⁶² The act is reprinted at: http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/pennst01.asp and in the Historical Society of Pennsylvania's Preserving American Freedom digital history project at <http://hsp.org/preserving-american-freedom>.

ing it—had to be smashed in order to propel both emancipation and Unionism forward. Here, we might say that Lincoln engaged in a form of creative destruction: using his military power to blow apart the abolitionist past. While written as a military order, the *Christian Recorder* noted, even the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation “carries with it a moral power that is irresistible.”⁶³ In other words, its liberationist aims transcended the document’s very legalistic language. Put in human terms, Lincoln was now less concerned with the Charles Biddles and James McDougalls of the Union world and more interested in the Frederick Douglasses and Henry McNeil Turners.⁶⁴ In no small way, the president had countermanded himself. As the *Christian Recorder* stated, “the Proclamation” proves that “the world moves.”⁶⁵

Stepping into a role long since envisioned by black abolitionists—who saw the legalistic and limited emancipation edicts of Butler, Fremont, and Hunter as bold steps toward broader black liberation—the president became the next great emancipator of Civil War times, a moral statesman on the side of right. “We shout for joy that we live to record this righteous decree,” Douglass wrote in October 1862.⁶⁶ While he would register concerns about Lincoln’s edict afterwards, Douglass’s initial view was shaped by the abolitionist limits set in the early war years. But as he recognized even in his most dour moods, “the first of January, 1863, was a memorable day in the progress of American liberty and civilization. It was the turning-point in the conflict between freedom and slavery.”⁶⁷ For Douglass, the final Emancipation Proclamation (stripped as it was of earlier colonizationist language and pointing toward black military action) showed that the ambivalent president had finally taken a step in the right direction.⁶⁸

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⁶³ *Christian Recorder*, Oct. 18, 1862.

⁶⁴ Glenn David Brasher, *The Peninsula Campaign and the Necessity of Emancipation: African Americans and the Fight for Freedom* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2012).

⁶⁵ *Christian Recorder*, Oct. 18, 1862.

⁶⁶ *Douglass’ Monthly*, Oct. 1862.

⁶⁷ *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass, Written by Himself* (Boston, 1892), 426.

⁶⁸ *Douglass’ Monthly*, Oct. and Nov. 1862.