**The Emancipation Proclamation**

Even though Lincoln did not intend to abolish slavery when the war began, circumstances changed rapidly. Enslaved people in the South, whose owners were waging war to make sure slavery endured, immediately interpreted the conflict as a war to end slavery. When Northern forces invaded the South, black men and women escaped from bondage and ran to US army lines, seeing the soldiers as liberators.

At first, the army had no idea what to do with this massive influx of formerly enslaved people, referring to them as "contrabands" since they were still technically considered pieces of property. Some commanders found them irritating, since it was difficult to feed and move so many extra civilians, and treated them abominably. Others saw the exodus as a double bonus: losing enslaved people not only demoralized white Southerners, it also deprived them of their labor force, meaning the South would soon run out of food and supplies.

By mid-1862, over a year into the fighting, it had become clear that slavery was a major war issue. Lincoln, like several of his generals, began to see that committing the United States to abolishing slavery would only help its cause. In the summer of 1862, he began to hash out the details of the Emancipation Proclamation.

**The Emancipation Proclamation**

Lincoln wrote the first draft of the Emancipation Proclamation and presented it to his cabinet on July 22, 1862 and asked for their opinions. They approved, but Lincoln's secretary of war Edwin Stanton suggested that they wait for a big military victory to issue the proclamation so that it wouldn't seem like a desperate measure. The summer went poorly for the US army. Not until September 17, 1862, did they win a decisive victory at the Battle of Antietam in Maryland.

**Interpreting the proclamation**

Lincoln is known for his unmatched eloquence as a writer and orator. The year after he wrote the Emancipation Proclamation, Lincoln would pen the Gettysburg Address, perhaps the most beautiful and well-known speech in American history. The Emancipation Proclamation, however, is anything but elegant. So why is the Emancipation Proclamation such a dense, inelegant piece of writing? Lincoln was a lawyer by trade, and he knew the importance of making sure contracts had no loopholes. Unlike the Gettysburg Address, which was a short speech delivered at the dedication of a cemetery, the Emancipation Proclamation was not intended to be eloquent or touching. It was intended to be an iron-clad legal document.

Though the term proclamation seems to imply that Lincoln stood up and "proclaimed" it somewhere, the Emancipation Proclamation was not a speech given by Lincoln. In essence, it was more like a decree. Lincoln wrote and signed it, and then copies of it were distributed for public notice. In many cases, US army officers read the document aloud to the formerly enslaved people who were accompanying the army in the South, letting them know that from that point forward they were officially free. Newspapers also reprinted the text of the proclamation.

It's important to note that Lincoln specified that enslaved people would only be freed in states which were "then in rebellion against the United States"—the states of the Confederacy. He even gave those states the opportunity to rejoin the Union before January 1, 1863 to prevent the proclamation from going into effect (they declined). The Emancipation Proclamation did *not* apply to enslaved people in the border states of Missouri, Kentucky, Delaware, and Maryland, which had not joined the Confederacy. Lincoln exempted the border states from the proclamation because he didn't want to tempt them into joining the Confederacy. Because the proclamation was a temporary war measure, it later had to be codified into law with the 13th Amendment to the Constitution. Congress officially outlawed slavery when it passed the Thirteenth Amendment in January, 1865.

**Significance of the proclamation[[1]](#footnote-1)**

1. You will find it in the lecture of the Civil War [↑](#footnote-ref-1)