

Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation: The End of Slavery in America

Harold Holzer

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Holzer, Harold (2004) "Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation: The End of Slavery in America," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 6 : Iss. 2 .

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol6/iss2/11>

Review

Holzer, Harold

Spring 2004

Guelzo, Allen C. *Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation: The End of Slavery in America*. Simon & Schuster, \$26.00 ISBN 743221826

Redeeming the Great Emancipator:

Lincoln and the Executive Order

It simply boggles the mind to think that no major book has until now been published about the Emancipation Proclamation, though it was arguably the most important executive order in American history. Certainly this second Declaration of Independence represented the crowning act of Abraham Lincoln's presidency, as many contemporaries acknowledged, and probably the most crucial, society-altering policy reform of the 19th century.

Yet scholarship on the subject has been appallingly meager. The great historian John Hope Franklin wrote a kind of celebratory centennial monograph in 1963, and LaWanda Cox produced a scholarly study entitled *Lincoln and Black Freedom* in 1985. But, unfortunately, the only other book of real significance to treat the subject since was Lerone Bennett Jr.'s 1999 *Forced Into Glory*, a virulent anti-Lincoln screed that perversely suggested, without a shred of proof, that Lincoln's proclamation enslaved more African Americans than it liberated.

Now, with the appearance of Professor Allen Guelzo's insightful, thoughtful, and definitive new book, this sorry state of historiographical affairs has finally received a long-needed corrective jolt. To say it was worth the wait would too easily excuse the indifference the Proclamation has endured for so many decades. But to say less would underestimate Guelzo's considerable achievement.

This is an ambitious book. The author attempts nothing less than to re-establish Lincoln's claim to the title of Great Emancipator—the iconic status

that has been eroding in recent generations at the hands of revisionists, self-emancipationists, anti-Lincoln historians, and plain old modern cynicism. Lincoln, such critics typically insist, had to be dragged kicking and screaming toward emancipation; had no choice but to issue his document since slaves were abandoning their masters in droves anyway; hated blacks and wanted them all deported to Africa; and in the end issued a Proclamation that freed slaves only where Lincoln had no authority, and kept them in chains where he did.

In response, Guelzo posits that Lincoln was a lifelong near abolitionist who merely sought a prudent moment in history to strike a blow against an institution he long hated. Moreover, Guelzo maintained, Lincoln crafted a brilliantly conceived document designed to protect the newly freed and the contrabands alike with ingeniously constructed legal language. It was not particularly that Lincoln's heart bled for oppressed African-Americans, the author concedes, though he viewed slavery itself as a monstrous injustice. Rather, the philosophy in which Lincoln believed convinced him that slavery impeded upward mobility in defiance of natural rights. Thus Guelzo's Lincoln enters the White House certain from the start that he will ultimately destroy slavery, merely waiting for the opportunity.

Not every reader will buy into Guelzo's overarching theory. Some may cling to the new traditional belief that Lincoln grew dramatically in office, until he felt emboldened to strike at slavery, as much out of military necessity as color-blind philanthropy. But all will surely be entranced by Guelzo's authoritative and scholarly story telling, bursting with quotes from contemporaries and period newspapers, all portrayed with fine scene-setting prose. Through his deft recasting of these sources, the author paints a vivid portrait of a Civil War president confronting agonizing military and political crises until the moment finally arrives to unshackle the slaves.

Guelzo does not claim that Lincoln's goal was always visible to the public or to historians. Along the way, Guelzo's liberator-in-waiting resists precipitous emancipation orders by his generals, keeps Congress guessing about whether he will sign its confiscation acts, desperately tries to impose compensated emancipation on loyal slave states, dabbles for far too long with the idea of colonizing freedmen in Africa and the Caribbean, and even infuriatingly delays approval of emancipation in the District of Columbia. Yet the author insists that Lincoln was not timid, vacillating, & inefficient, as he seemed at the time to Radical politician Zachariah Chandler, but rather steadily following his

own path to black freedom. Moreover, as Guelzo reminds us, it was a path that the President came to believe was guided by the hand of God.

Answering those who insist that Lincoln was a reluctant emancipator, Guelzo makes a strong case for Lincoln's vision, daring, and political wisdom. And he heaps deserved credit on Lincoln for refusing to back away from his order once it held out to blacks the long-elusive promise of freedom. As the abolitionist minister Henry Ward Beecher would later observe: Though Abraham Lincoln is sure, he is slow, yet though he is slow, he is sure.

Guelzo provides very good evidence for his arguments. The diary entries of Lincoln's contemporaries, some new to this reader, testify in one voice to his determination to emancipate, even against the advice of Cabinet Ministers thought to be more zealous anti-slavery men. And Guelzo points convincingly to Lincoln's less than exquisite political timing as a barometer of his courage: the President issued his preliminary proclamation only weeks before all-important, off-year Congressional elections, notwithstanding the obvious fact that such a bold order was likely to frighten white voters. Looked at coldly, Guelzo argues, the timing of the Proclamation amounted to political suicide. It nearly was. Lincoln's Republicans went down to bloody defeat at the polls in the wake of which the chief executive refused to consider backing away from the promise of emancipation as the countdown began to the final edict of January 1, 1863. Falling stock prices and increased desertions from the ranks never persuaded him that he had made a mistake, and Guelzo rightly reminds us that the beleaguered President deserves enormous credit for his tenacity.

It is worth noting that this book also provides a virtuoso analysis of context and place. Guelzo has not only pinned down precise times and sites at which Lincoln wrote, revealed plans for, announced, and signed his order, but manages in so doing to present a rich and compelling portrait of wartime Washington, particularly life in the busy wartime White House. Balancing recalcitrant, possibly disloyal generals, reluctant cabinet officers, righteous abolitionists, ill-advised adventurers, understandably impatient Blacks, critical newspaper editors, nervous fellow Republicans, and teetering slaveholding border states, Lincoln miraculously keeps a steady hand on the ship of state and refuses to drift from the emancipation policy once he seizes his prudent moment.

Although Guelzo sometimes reaches for the purple phrase (The newspapers picked up Lincoln's letter to Greeley like candy scattered on the floor; Death was

Abraham Lincoln's silent neighbor), his descriptions are more often quite felicitous (Colonization was a wordless abomination to the abolitionists and an insult to the North's free blacks), and the narrative drives forward with brisk muscularity. I particularly liked Guelzo's description of anti-abolitionists as fainthearts and unrelies. On the other hand, the greatest mystery of all surrounding Emancipation—how wartime Washington kept it secret during the two months between Lincoln's initial announcements of the policy to his cabinet and to the public—remains unsolved. Years ago, William Safire argued that it was hardly a secret at all. Yet no one has ever convinced me that this was so.

As Allen Guelzo laments early in this book, Emancipation scholarship has too long been inhibited by historian Richard Hofstadter's famously glib contention that Lincoln's greatest document boasted all the moral grandeur of a bill of lading. Guelzo shatters this preoccupation by making the most convincing argument yet advanced for Lincoln's use of legalistic Emancipation Proclamation language to guarantee liberty in the courts. Along the way he craftily adds for good measure that bills of lading can, in and of themselves, be quite fascinating. He proceeds to explain what such documents contain—no one has ever tried this—and the result is a revelatory digression. It also offers a subtly ingenious jab at critics who have long maintained that had Lincoln been a genuine, enthusiastic liberator, his proclamation would have sounded like the Gettysburg Address.

Was Lincoln truly a revolutionary and a political gambler extraordinaire? Or was he so desperate to save the Union that he overcame lifelong conservatism to use African Americans to fight for their own freedom? Did African Americans emancipate themselves by fleeing into Union lines (forcing Lincoln merely to validate their initiative, or does Lincoln deserve to reclaim his 19th century status as liberator?

Guelzo's milestone book will not settle the case, but it lays down the gauntlet. Most important of all, it ushers in a new, long-needed age of Emancipation scholarship with a flourish. The greatest act of Lincoln's administration at last has a great book to explain, dissect, and appreciate it. Guelzo may not have ended the simmering debate about Lincoln's reputation as an Emancipator, or rescued Lincoln from 40 years of declining status among African Americans, but he has begun a conversation that is long overdue. And he has done so with a book that immediately takes its place not only as the newest study of Emancipation, but far and away, the very best.

Near the end of his narrative, Guelzo recalls with sadness the negative influence Lerone Bennett has exerted on Lincoln's reputation, especially among African Americans: When, a year after *Forced into Glory* was published, Bennett was invited to lecture in Harlem at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, white participants in the program were visibly shaken, not only by Bennett's violent harangue against Lincoln but by the enthusiastic applause (laced with anti-Semitic comments) of the black audience.

I was one of the white panelists at the Schomburg that day. While there were other whites in attendance, while I recall only one anti-Semitic slur (so ludicrous that no one paid attention), and while I would like to think I wasn't really surprised either by Bennett's diatribe or the audience approval it elicited, I only wish I had been able to make the case for Lincoln as convincingly as Guelzo does in this long-needed book.

Harold Holzer has co-authored six of his 18 books on Lincoln and Civil War art, printmaking, and photography. He is a member of the U.S. Lincoln Bicentennial Commission and vice chairman of The Lincoln Forum.