

Lincoln's Pragmatism

HISTORY 17B

Paper 2

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Abraham Lincoln was a slave-owner. He was also the author of the Emancipation Proclamation, which freed the slaves in the Confederacy. By the end of the war his position was moving towards full emancipation of all slaves in the United States. From this we have to conclude that Lincoln faced an internal conflict: It was in his own personal economic interest to keep his slaves working for him but it was in the best interest of the country that slaves should be freed. It is a classic case of cognitive dissonance; his mind could hold both views at the same time not realizing the contradiction. This was possible because, from Lincoln's point of view, the issue of slavery was of secondary importance. His primary objective was to keep the Union together and lead the country to a prosperous future. Lincoln's shifting view on slavery was therefore a matter of pragmatism rather than moral conviction. His views--or at least what we can surmise based on his speeches and letters--relating to the status of African Americans changed according to the political situation and the needs of the country.

The political situation became more than volatile by March 4, 1861, when President Lincoln gave his first inaugural speech. In January seven states seceded and in February they formed the Confederacy with its own Confederate Constitution. Despite this Lincoln still believed that the nation could be held together without a war. He closed his speech with eloquent, conciliatory words, directed to the seceded states, signaling this intention: "We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies." (Majewski, 76) The main point of his speech showed that the "Union is perpetual confirmed by the history of the Union itself." (71) This was the driving idea that he built his position around.

He supported the enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law. He based his reasoning on the strict interpretation of the supreme law of the land, the Constitution, "[escaped persons] shall be delivered up on claim of the party to whom such service or labor may be due." (70) However, he

did not make a clear statement about how this should be administered. My “how” refers to the fact that he identified the problem that capturing and delivering escaped slaves cost money but did not outline who should cover these expenses; commenting only “It can be of little consequence to him or to others by which authority it is done.” (71)

Moving closer to the heart of my topic itself, let me quote that he said, “I have no purpose, directly or indirectly, to interfere with the institution of slavery in the States where it exists.” (70) Thus he ensured the Southern states that their institution would remain in place if they returned to the Union. It encouraged them to do so. However the issue of what to do with the new, unincorporated territories was not addressed in the same declarative manner. Should slavery be allowed there or not? In regard to this he said, “the Constitution does not expressly say.” (73) These are words of a truly pragmatic politician. It could appear to both pro and anti slavery advocates that the issue was still open to discussion and not closed. Had he took either the position that slavery could be implemented in the Territories or not, he would have faced strong opposition from one side or the other. But with his carefully chosen words he was trying to preserve peace. There is no way of knowing what he was thinking in his heart about the issue of slavery at this time.

17 months later, on August 22, 1862, in a private letter to Horace Greeley he could be more open on his stance, “What I do about slavery, and the colored race, I do because I believe it helps to save the Union.”(77) No analytical skill is required to figure out from this statement that he did not have strong convictions about slaves and slavery at all. I do not know the context of this letter, how close Lincoln was to the addressee of the letter, or what kind of relationship they had, but I assume that he was speaking his mind to a friend. Even if my assumption is incorrect I can be sure, that these thoughts are closer to his inner beliefs than his earlier, inaugural speech.

That was a political statement intended to soothe a wide range of audience, while this had no significant political consequence. Once again, he proved to be a pragmatist on the slavery issue by not supporting either side.

The Emancipation Proclamation went into effect in January 1863, but its text was written and known a few months earlier. It was Lincoln's "baby", it contained his ideas, in his words. On the surface it seemed straightforward, "All persons held as slaves [...] shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free." (77) By reading the sentence without its middle section one would think that slavery as such had been abolished by this decree. Consider though what I cut out: "within any State or designated part of a State, the people whereof shall then be in rebellion against the United States." (77) The Proclamation was issued at the height of the Civil War, when the Union was not yet in control of the Southern states. In other words Lincoln "freed" the slaves in the part of the country he had no control over. As a political tactic it worked well, because it encouraged slaves to flee from the Confederacy. Even if they stayed they were in a better position to bargain for more personal freedom. However we still do not know whether Lincoln fully supported the ideas contained in this document or not. What we can observe is that its language is heavy with legalese. Lincoln was certainly capable of writing wonderfully flowing speeches and papers. I believe he chose not to do so here, because his heart was not behind this issue. He wanted it to sound official and it is. This is not a statement that the masses could carry in their hearts. It was written for a specific, strategic, might I say pragmatic, purpose to influence the outcome of the war.

We witness a dramatic shift in one of Lincoln's private letters, written half a year later, August 26, 1863, to James C. Conkling, "I certainly wish that all men could be free." (79) Lincoln departed from his earlier interpretation of the Constitution regarding slavery. Now he

emphasized that the Constitution “invests its Commander-in chief, with the law of war, in time of war.”(80) Then he continued that if slaves were property and the president had the right to use any tool necessary to win a war, then from these it followed that he had the right to free the above-mentioned property. His logic, again, is purely focusing on how to win the war. Even if he was concerned with moral issues he did not go into great detail about them. This letter was sent to a pro-slavery Unionist in order to convince him to keep fighting, even if it meant slaves would be freed.

This letter was the first of the studied documents with evidence that Lincoln considered slaves more than animals. He introduced a line of thought with these words, “Negroes, like other people, act upon motives. Why should they do any thing for us, if we will do nothing, for them?” (81) He acknowledged them as human beings, similar to himself. Until this point there were no signs that African Americans in his eyes would be anything more than property or factors to consider in the course of political decision making. My thesis is that Lincoln’s approach to slavery was de facto a pragmatic one, but I am still curious about his personal opinion. This was the first sign for me that he even had one.

The final document I would like to analyze is Lincoln’s second inaugural address from March 1865. In our reader it is barely over a page, while his speech four years earlier was seven pages long. “Then a statement somewhat in detail of course to be pursued seemed fitting and proper.”(81) Now it was not necessary: the Civil War was practically over, the Union was victorious. The question of the day was how to live in peace, how to reconcile the different worldviews, and how to reconstruct the country. Without giving specific answers to these questions Lincoln attempted to set the tone for this work with his closing words, “lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.” (83) This was his overarching principle in the aftermath

of the war. Regarding slavery he had this to say: “one-eighth of the whole population were colored slaves...All knew that this [their] interest was somehow the cause of the war.” (82) Speaking from the winner’s position he compared and contrasted the pro and antislavery forces, “Both read the same Bible and pray to the same God...The prayers of both could not be answered.” (82) On one hand he acknowledged the real cause of the war. On the other hand he did not want to provoke the enemy who had just lost the war. He still (and again) did not say whether slavery was morally right or wrong, acceptable or not. Thus we still do not know his personal opinion.

What did we learn about Lincoln’s changing views on slavery and emancipation? That he did not care much for either. He held no strong opinion in either direction. For him other issues--such as keeping the Union together, winning the war, or later, building peace--superceded this. He did issue the Proclamation of Independence, freeing slaves at least in theory, but we never heard him making a personal statement expounding his own beliefs. Details on what legal and civil liberties the freed slaves should have were also missing. (After his death, in the Reconstruction era, this became the most important issue.) On the other hand, he initially supported the Fugitive Slave Law and retracted his opinion only in the advanced stage of the Civil War. His related policies were pragmatically oriented. Whatever he perceived was required in order to advance his agenda in the political situation he said. There is no single aspect of his view--related to the complex issues of slavery, emancipation, and abolitionism--we can be sure was his personal belief.

Works cited

Majewski, John. *History of the American Peoples, 1840-1920: A Primary Source Reader*. Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company, 2001.

Case, *History 17B Reader*. UCSB, Santa Barbara: The Alternative Copy Shop, 2004.

How do the documents written by Abraham Lincoln in the Majewski reader demonstrate changes in the president's view on slavery and emancipation during the course of the Civil War? What counted for these changes? In your view, were the changes primarily the result of political expediency, military circumstances, or changes in conviction?

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