

Lincoln's Resolve Concerning the Preservation of the Union

When Abraham Lincoln was sworn in as president, he promised to do his utmost to preserve the country. He considered his "sacred duty" more important than any other issue, even slavery. The onetime farmhand undermined the institution of slavery like ocean-waves slowly eroding a cliff. He knew that moving too quickly toward slavery's abolishment could destroy the country.

Lincoln quickly learned that politics was an art of patience and compromise, that goals like slavery's abolishment might not be accomplished in his lifetime. During his two years as a congressman in the 1840's, Lincoln tried to ban slavery in the District of Columbia and failed. His strategy against slavery evolved into one of attrition, focused on disallowing slavery from oozing into new territories.

The Ancient Romans became drunk off of slaves and stopped advancing technologically because of an over-dependence on them. By 1860, over 90% of the USA's industrialization capacity was situated in the North which attracted an influx of European migrants. The agriculture based South lacked railroad systems which would slow its logistics in the upcoming war. Lincoln readied for the South to outdate itself to the point of relinquishing slavery.

Crittenden's Compromise was a proposal brought to the Senate floor in late 1860 that would allow slavery to spread through the Southwest but banned its entrenchment in the Northwest. It was initially hailed as a way to buy the country time on the issue of southern state secession. However, Lincoln, now president-elect, sent a rapid flurry of letters to members in the

newly formed Republican party urging them to reject the proposal. It was voted down, 25 to 23. The American Civil War began four months later.

In Lincoln's view, Crittenden's proposal was medicine for a crisis; yet, it was far from the cure to the underlying disease. The United States was fractured over what values it stood for. Its national identity was where the disease lived and thrived. Lincoln considered unjust bondage the epitome of injustice; however, because the country's preservation was most important to him he publicly stated that the southern states could keep their slaves if they rejoined the Union.

There were two notable times during the war when Lincoln's generals seized Confederate territory and proclaimed all slaves in the area to be free. Lincoln quickly negated their orders. He knew these quixotic actions risked the allegiance of slave owning Union states like Maryland and Kentucky. Lincoln wrote in a letter, "I think to lose Kentucky is nearly the same as to lose the whole game." Lincoln put a deal on the table for them: free a slave and collect \$400 from the government. In the past, countries like Britain, Russia and Brazil had set up compensation plans for slave owners lost "property." The Union border states however were not interested in the refund deal.

New York Tribune editor Horace Greeley argued that "all attempts to put down the Rebellion and at the same time uphold its inciting cause are preposterous and futile." Lincoln responded publicly: "My paramount object is to save the Union, and is not either to save or to destroy slavery." He added that the public should not misconstrue this statement with his personal stance on slavery: that all men should be free.

Lincoln realized that a total Union victory might depend on ending appeasement to the South. The North had to be more firm about what it stood for lest that lack of confidence seep

onto the battlefield. In addition, Lincoln didn't want Great Britain, which was helping the Confederacy build warships, to recognize the rebel state as a sovereign nation. Trimming the long hairs of slavery's beard would appeal to Britain's slaveless sensibilities. Therefore, Lincoln stopped assuaging Confederates with promises that they could keep their slaves if they returned to the Union.

As the costs and death toll of the war rose, public attitudes in the Union shifted toward a more radical stance against slavery. On January 1st, 1863, Lincoln enacted an executive proclamation that freed all slaves in the rebelling states. Because this proclamation did not end slavery in the border states, the abolitionists howled. Copperhead Democrats were incensed, citing that "Honest Abe" had lied about the war's intent. This limited emancipation may have softened the blow for the upcoming 13th Amendment - the abolishment of slavery and indentured servitude *except* as a punishment for crime.

Lincoln and the Republicans worked hard to pass the 13th Amendment before the southern states returned to the Union. If the 11 rebel states rejoined in time, there would be a strong chance of the amendment being voted down. The Northerners might then force ratification of the amendment, and the Southerners, having just lost the war, would be too weak to object. In his last public speech, Lincoln addressed that not following voting laws would be a costly error to the country. It could trigger yet another national identity crisis.

A maze-like path led to a shackle-free United States. The winding turns to get there resulted from Lincoln's refusal to make abolition his number one priority. He had learned from trying to end slavery in the 1840's that a straightforward approach wouldn't work, because it was

too overt to his enemies. Only when he noticed that curtailing slavery would aid in reunifying the country, would he chop at its tentacles.