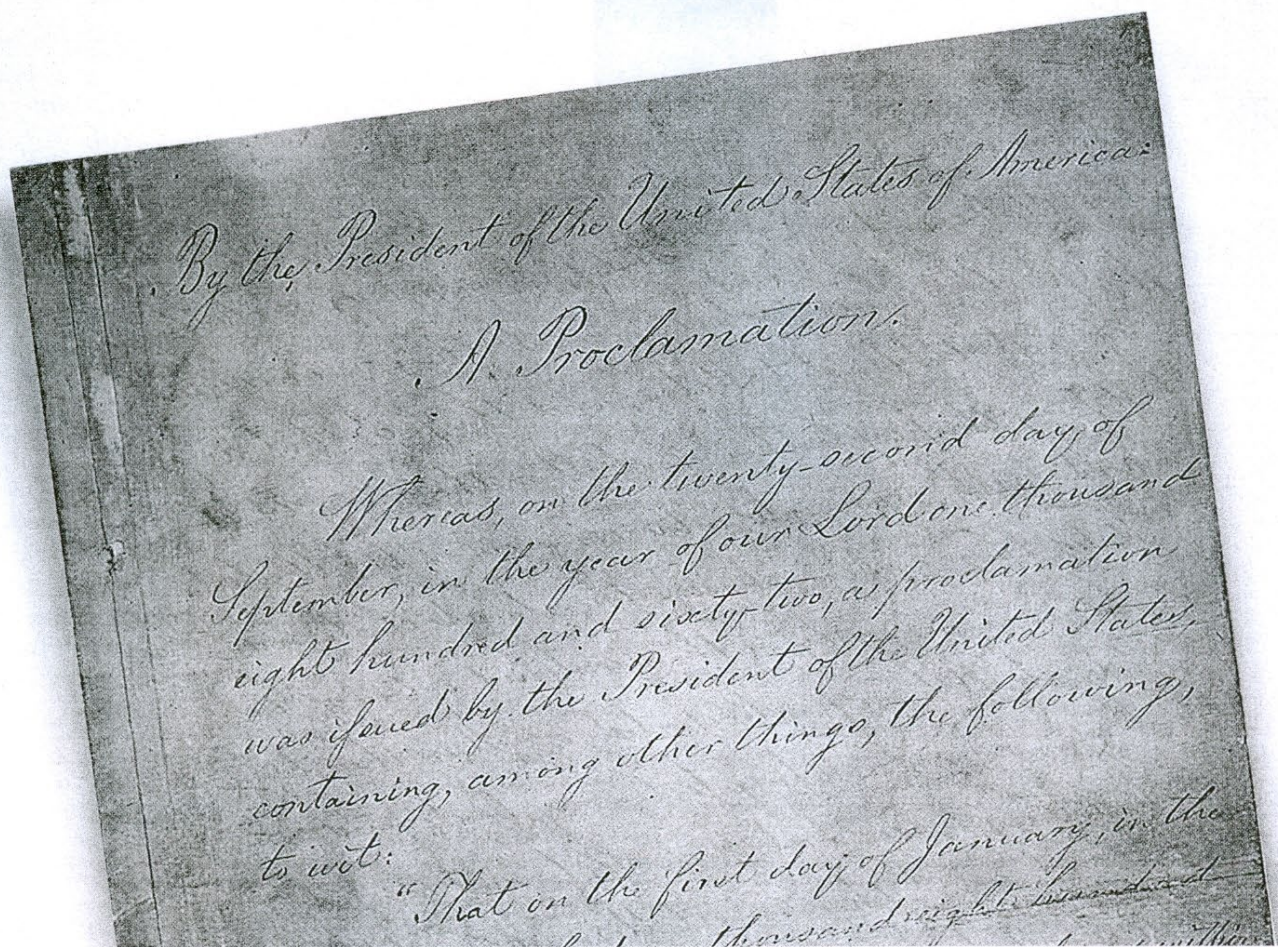


“MY WHOLE SOUL IS IN IT”



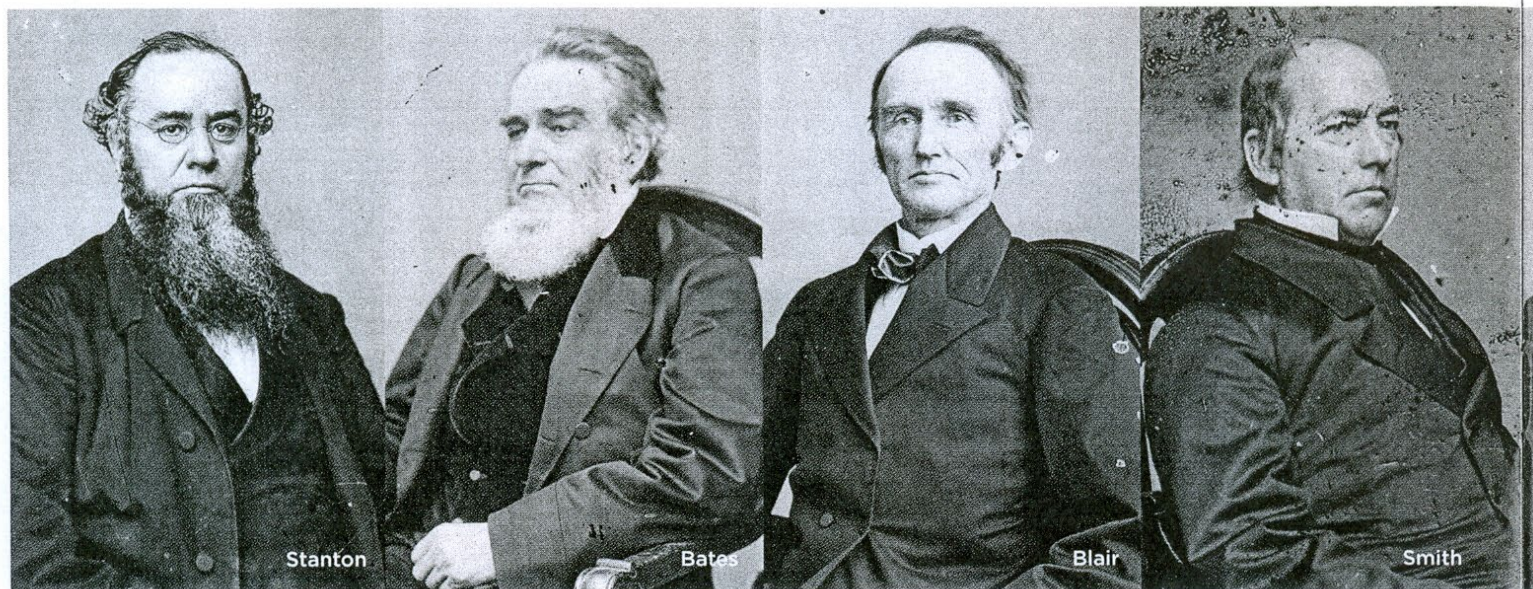
As his army faltered and his cabinet bickered,
Abraham Lincoln determined that
“we must free the slaves or be ourselves subdued.”
In 1862, he finally got his chance

BY DORIS KEARNS GOODWIN



Lincoln's impetus for issuing the Emancipation Proclamation (opposite, the pen he used to sign it) was military—not moral—necessity. But after taking pen in hand on January 1, 1863, he said: "I never, in my life, felt more certain that I was doing right, than I do in signing this paper."





WHILE WASHINGTON sweltered through the long, hot summer of 1862, Abraham Lincoln made the momentous decision that would define both his presidency and the course of the Civil War.

The great question of what to do about slavery had provoked increasingly bitter debates on Capitol Hill for months. Back in March, Lincoln had asked the legislature to pass a joint resolution providing federal aid to any state willing to adopt a plan for the gradual abolition of slavery; without the approval of the border-state representatives, it went nowhere.

Meanwhile, the Republican majority in Congress, freed from the domination of the Southern bloc, began to push its own agenda on slavery. In April, Congress passed a bill providing for the compensated emancipation of slaves in the District of Columbia. The bill met Lincoln's wholehearted approval, for he had "never doubted the constitutional authority of Congress to abolish slavery" in areas that fell under the jurisdiction of the federal government.

But the situation became more complex when the radical bloc in Congress began to address slavery in the seceded Southern states where it already existed and was protected by the Constitution. In July, despite the vehement protests of Democrats and conservative Republicans, the radical majority passed a new confiscation bill. Broader than the one passed the previous year, which had limited the federal government to confiscating and freeing only those fugitive slaves employed by Rebels in the field, the new act emancipated all slaves of persons engaged in rebellion, regardless of involvement in military affairs. The bill was ill considered, providing no workable means of enforcement and no procedure to determine whether the owner of a slave crossing Union lines

was actually engaged in insurrection, but it passed. Before signing what would become known as the Second Confiscation Act, Lincoln obtained revisions that made it more likely to pass constitutional muster.

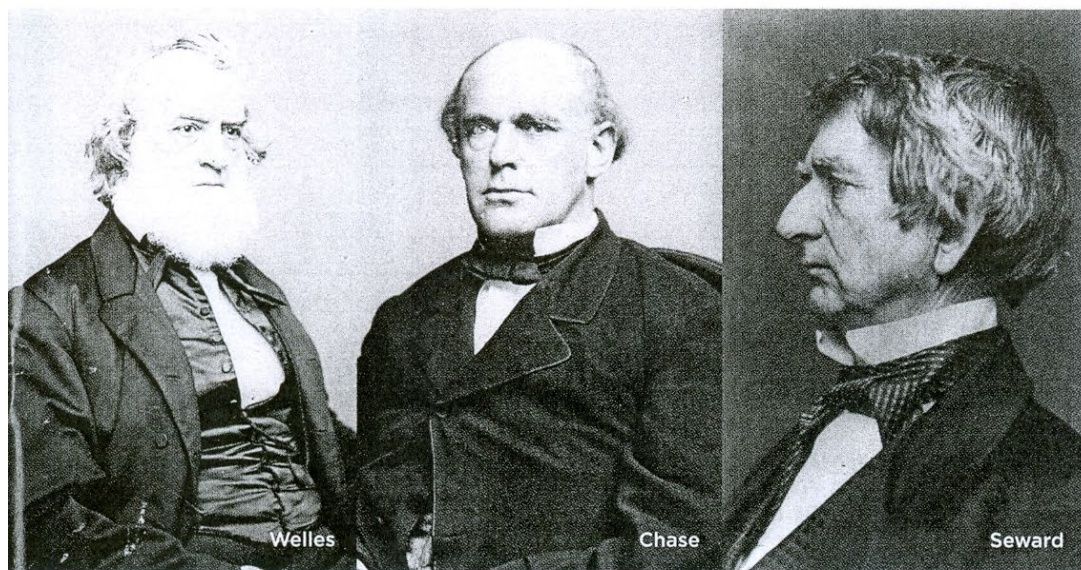
Within the cabinet, too, the rancor over slavery infected every discourse. The debates had grown "so bitter," according to Secretary of State William Henry Seward, that personal and even official relationships among members were ruptured, leading to "a prolonged discontinuance of Cabinet meetings." Though Tuesdays and Fridays were still designated for cabinet sessions, each secretary remained in his department unless a messenger arrived to confirm that a meeting would be held. Seward recalled that when these general discussions were still taking place, Lincoln had listened intently but had not taken "an active part in them." For Lincoln, the problem of slavery was not an abstract issue. While he concurred with the most passionate abolitionists that slavery was "a moral, a social and a political wrong," as president, he felt he could not ignore the constitutional protection of the institution where it already existed.

The Army of the Potomac's devastating reverses in the Peninsula Campaign that June made it clear that extraordinary means were necessary to save the Union—and gave Lincoln an opening to deal more directly with slavery.

Daily reports from the battlefields illuminated the innumerable uses to which slaves were put by the Confederacy. They dug trenches and built fortifications for the army. They were brought into camps to serve as teamsters, cooks and hospital attendants, so that soldiers were freed to fight. They labored on the home front, tilling fields, raising crops and picking cotton, so their masters could go to war without fearing that their families would go hungry. If the Rebels were divested of their slaves, who would then be free to join the Union forces, the North could gain a decided advantage. Seen in this light, emancipation could be considered a military necessity, a legitimate exercise of the president's constitutional war powers. The border states—Delaware, Maryland, Kentucky and

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Within Lincoln's cabinet, reactions to his proposed proclamation reflected bitter divisions over slavery. From left, War Secretary Edwin Stanton and Attorney General Edward Bates favored immediate publication; Postmaster General Montgomery Blair objected that it would alienate border states, and Interior Secretary Caleb Smith considered resigning. Navy Secretary Gideon Welles, Treasury Secretary Salmon Chase and Secretary of State William Henry Seward supported it, but with various reservations.

Missouri—had refused Lincoln's idea of compensated emancipation as a voluntary first step, insisting that any such action should be initiated in the slave states. A historic decision was taking shape in Lincoln's mind.

Lincoln revealed his preliminary thinking to Seward and Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles in the early hours of Sunday, July 13, as they rode together in the president's carriage to the funeral of the infant son of War Secretary Edwin Stanton. During the journey, Welles recorded in his diary, Lincoln informed them that he was considering "emancipating the slaves by proclamation in case the Rebels did not cease to persist in their war." He had "dwelt earnestly on the gravity, importance, and delicacy" of the subject, he said, and had "come to the conclusion that it was a military necessity absolutely essential for the salvation of the Union, that we must free the slaves or be ourselves subdued." Thus, the constitutional protection of slavery could and would be overridden by the constitutionally sanctioned war powers of the president.

This was, Welles clearly recognized, "a new departure for the President, for until this time, in all our previous interviews . . . he had been prompt and emphatic in denouncing any interference by the General Government with the subject." Seward, normally talkative, said only that the "subject involved consequences so vast and momentous that he should wish to bestow on it mature reflection before giving a decisive answer," though he was inclined to think it "justifiable."

So the matter rested until Monday morning, July 21, when messengers were dispatched across Washington with notices of a special cabinet meeting to be held at 10 a.m. "It has been so long since any consultation has been held that it struck me as a novelty," Treasury Secretary Salmon P. Chase wrote in his diary.

WHEN THE CABINET CONVENED, all members save Montgomery Blair, the postmaster general, were in attendance. For this special meeting, the cabinet was summoned to the second-floor library rather than the president's official office. There, surrounded by the

curved bookshelves that Mary Todd Lincoln had recently filled with splendidly bound sets of Shakespeare and Sir Walter Scott's novels, the president began with an admission that he was "profoundly concerned at the present aspect of affairs, and had determined to take some definitive steps in respect to military action and slavery."

The members listened as Lincoln read several orders he was contemplating. One would authorize Union generals in Confederate territory to appropriate any property necessary to sustain themselves in the field; another would sanction the payment of wages to blacks brought into the army's employ. Taken together, these orders signaled a more vigorous prosecution of the war. When the discussion moved to address the possible arming of those blacks in the army's employ, Stanton and Chase were in favor. Lincoln, Chase recorded, was "not prepared to decide the question."

When the discussions ran long, the president scheduled another cabinet session the following day, July 22, to reveal his primary purpose in calling the meeting. This second session was likely held in Lincoln's office, as depicted in Francis Carpenter's famous painting, *First Reading of the Emancipation Proclamation by President Lincoln*. There, surrounded by evidence of the ever-expanding war, with battlefield maps everywhere, the previous day's conversation continued.

The desultory talk abruptly ended when Lincoln took the floor and announced he had called them together in order to read the preliminary draft of an emancipation proclamation. He understood the "differences in the Cabinet on the slavery question" and welcomed their suggestions after they heard what he had to say; but he wanted them to know that he "had resolved upon this step, and had not called them together to ask their advice." Then, removing two foolscap sheets from his pocket and adjusting his glasses on his nose, he began to read what amounted to a legal brief for emancipation based

DORIS KEARNS GOODWIN received the Pulitzer Prize for history for a previous book, *No Ordinary Time* (1995).

on the chief executive's powers as commander in chief.

His draft proclamation set January 1, 1863, little more than five months away, as the date on which all slaves within states still in rebellion against the Union would be declared free, "thenceforward, and forever." Though it did not cover the roughly 425,000 slaves in the loyal border states—where, without the use of his war powers, no constitutional authority justified his action—the proclamation was shocking in scope. It required no cumbersome enforcement proceedings. In a single stroke, it superseded legislation on slavery and property rights that had guided policy in 11 states for nearly three quarters of a century. Three and a half million black people who had lived enslaved for generations were promised freedom. It was a daring move, Welles later said, "fraught with consequences, immediate and remote, such as human foresight could not penetrate."

The cabinet listened in silence. With the exception of Seward and Welles, the members were startled by the boldness of Lincoln's proclamation. Only Stanton and, surprisingly, Attorney General Edward Bates declared themselves in favor of "its immediate promulgation."

Stanton instantly grasped the military value of the proclamation. As for Bates, one of the more conservative members of the cabinet, the Missourian's sudden support can be traced in part to the terrible division that slavery and the war had wrought upon his family: his sons had joined opposing sides in the war, with one in the Confederate Army facing the prospect of going into battle against any of four brothers. Bates valued his family above all



For constitutional reasons, Lincoln could not halt slavery in the border states—Delaware, Maryland, Kentucky and Missouri.

else. He had long favored gradual emancipation, but if the president's proclamation could bring the war to a speedier conclusion, he would give it his "very decided approval." Bates based his approval, however, on the condition that the freed slaves would be deported to Central America or Africa. Lincoln insisted that any emigration must be voluntary.

Welles remained silent. He later admitted that the prospect of emancipation involved such unpredictable results, "carrying with it a revolution of the social, civil, and industrial habits and condition of society in all the slave States," that he was oppressed by the "solemnity and weight" of the decision. He feared that, far from shortening the war, emancipation would generate an "energy of desperation on the part of the slave-owners" and "intensify the struggle." Yet, while the "extreme exercise of war powers" troubled him, Welles loyally supported Lincoln.

Interior Secretary Caleb Smith kept silent as well, though he, too, had serious reservations. John Usher, the assistant secretary of the department, later recalled Smith telling him that if Lincoln issued the proclamation, he would "resign and go home and attack the administration."

The division of sentiment within the cabinet was manifest as Blair, Chase and Seward spoke. Arriving late, after Lincoln's announcement that he had already resolved to issue the proclamation, Blair spoke up vigorously against acting at this time and asked to file his objections. While he supported the idea of compensated, gradual emancipation linked to colonization, he feared that the president's radical proclamation would cause such an outcry among conservatives and Democrats that Republicans would lose the fall elections. More important, it would "put in jeopardy the patriotic element in the border States, already severely tried," and "would, as soon as it reached them, be likely to carry over those States to the secessionists."

Lincoln replied that while he had considered these dangers, he had tried for months to get the border states "to move in this matter, convinced . . . that it was their true interest to do so, but his labors were vain," according to a history Welles

wrote. The time had come to move ahead. He would, however, willingly let Blair file his written objections.

Perhaps the most astonishing response came from Chase. No cabinet member had more vehemently promoted emancipation, and none could match his lifelong commitment to the abolitionist cause. Yet when

faced with a presidential initiative that, he admitted, went "beyond anything I have recommended," he recoiled. According to Stanton's notes, Chase argued that it was "a measure of great danger—and would lead to universal emancipation." He feared that disorder would engulf the South, leading to "depredation and massacre on the one hand, and support to the insurrection on the other." He recommended a more incremental approach, "allowing Generals to organize and arm the slaves" and "directing the Commanders of Departments to proclaim emancipation within their Districts as soon as practicable." Still, he considered the proclamation better than no action at all; he would support it.

Although Chase's argument that the army might better control the pace of emancipation was legitimate, it is difficult not to suspect personal considerations behind his failure to wholeheartedly endorse the president's proclamation. Chase



Casualties at Antietam (in a stereographic view) exceeded 22,000, but the Union victory gave Lincoln the event he sought.

had seen his bright hopes for the presidency vanish in 1856 and 1860. No president since Andrew Jackson, in 1832, had been reelected, and the next election was only two years away. Chase's strongest claim to beat Lincoln for the nomination in 1864 lay with the growing circle of radical Republicans frustrated by Lincoln's slowness on the slavery issue. The proclamation would undercut Chase's potential candidacy.

Stanton feared that Chase's arguments would deter Lincoln from issuing his proclamation, letting the "golden moment" slip away. Lincoln later maintained, however, that not a single argument had been presented that he "had not already fully anticipated and settled in [his] own mind, until Secretary Seward spoke."

Seward expressed his worry that the proclamation might provoke a racial war in the South so disruptive to cotton that the ruling classes in England and France would intervene to protect their economic interests. As secretary of state, he was particularly sensitive to the threat of European intervention. Curiously, despite his greater access to intelligence from abroad, he failed to grasp what Lincoln intuitively understood: that once the Union truly committed itself to emancipation, the masses in Europe, who regarded slavery as an evil demanding eradication, would not be easily maneuvered into supporting the South.

Beyond his worries about intervention, Seward had little faith in the efficacy of proclamations that he considered nothing more than paper without the muscle of the advancing Union Army to enforce them. Seward's position, in fact, was nearly identical to that held by Chase. His preference, he said, "would have been to confiscate all rebel property, including slaves, as fast as the territory was conquered." Only an immediate military presence could assure escaped slaves of protection. Yet Seward's practical focus underestimated

the proclamation's power to unleash the moral fervor of the North and keep the Republican Party united by making freedom for the slaves an avowed objective of the war.

Despite his concerns, Seward had no thought of opposing the proclamation. Once Lincoln had made up his mind, Seward was steadfast in his loyalty to him. He demurred only on the timing. "Mr. President," he said, "I approve of the proclamation, but I question the expediency of its issue at this juncture. The depression of the public mind, consequent upon our repeated reverses, is so great that I fear. . . . It may be viewed as the last measure of an exhausted government, a cry for help." Better to wait, he grandiloquently suggested, "until the eagle of victory takes his flight," and buoyed by military success, "hang your proclamation about his neck."

"The wisdom of the view of the Secretary of State struck me with very great force," Lincoln later told the artist Carpenter. "It was an aspect of the case that, in all my thought upon the subject, I had entirely overlooked. The result was that I put the draft of the proclamation aside, as you do your sketch for a picture, waiting for a victory."

Lincoln pinned his hopes for that victory on the newly assembled Army of Virginia, headed by Gen. John Pope, and saw those hopes crushed by another Union disaster in the Second Battle of Bull Run that August. But the Union victory at Antietam on September 17 gave him the event he awaited. On September 22, he convened a cabinet meeting and revealed his decision to issue an emancipation proclamation the following New Year's Day.

After the proclamation was published in preliminary form, a large crowd of cheering serenaders gathered at the White House. But as the first day of January 1863 approached, the public evinced a "general air of doubt" regarding the president's intention to follow through.

THE CYNICS WERE WRONG. Despite repeated warnings that issuing the proclamation would have harmful consequences for the Union's cause, Lincoln never considered retracting his pledge. The final proclamation introduced a new provision: while the document proclaimed that "all persons held as slaves" within states and parts of states still in rebellion "are, and henceforward shall be free," Lincoln, for the first time, officially authorized the recruitment of blacks into the armed forces. Stanton and Chase had advocated this step for many months, yet Lincoln, knowing the disaffection it would provoke in his governing coalition, had hesitated. Now, as the public began to comprehend the massive manpower necessary to fight a prolonged war, he believed the timing was right.

On the morning he would deliver the historic proclamation, Lincoln rose early. He walked to his office to make final revisions and sent the document by messenger to the State Department to be put into legal form. Seward returned from the State Department with the formally copied proclamation shortly before 11 a.m. Lincoln read it and made ready to sign it when he noticed a technical error in the format. The document had to be returned for correction. Since the traditional White House New Year's reception was about to begin, the signing would have to be delayed.

The first hour of the three-hour reception was reserved for Washington officials—diplomats, justices and high officers in the armed forces. All the cabinet members and their families were there, with the exception of Caleb Smith, who, although he had come to favor the proclamation, had recently resigned his Department of Interior post to become a U.S. district court judge in Indiana.

At noon, the cabinet members left to prepare for their own receptions, and the gates to the White House were opened to the general public. The immense and disorderly crowd surged into the mansion at the cost of torn coattails and lost bonnets. The journalist Noah Brooks was relieved when he finally reached the Blue Room, where a single line formed to shake the president's hand. He had recently noted how Lincoln's appearance had "grievously altered from the happy-faced Springfield lawyer" he had first met in 1856. "His hair is grizzled, his gait more stooping, his countenance sallow, and there is a sunken, deathly look about the large, cavernous eyes." Nonetheless, the president greeted every visitor with a smile and a kind remark, "his blessed old pump handle working steadily" to ensure that his "People's Levee" would be a success.

After mingling with the crowd, Brooks took his California friends "a-calling" at the homes of various cabinet members. It was a beautiful, sunny day, and the streets were jammed with carriages. At Chase's mansion, they shook hands with the secretary and his "very beautiful" daughter, Kate. Chase was "gentlemanly in his manners," Brooks noted, "though he has a painful way of holding his head straight, which leads one to fancy that his shirt collar cuts his ears." Their next stop was Seward's Lafayette Square house, where Brooks' eye, initially drawn to the elegant furnishings in the upstairs parlor, came to rest on "the prodigious nose" of the secretary, who greet-

ed each visitor "with all of his matchless *suaviter in modo*."

Of all the receptions that day, the Stantons' was the most elaborate. Brooks was overwhelmed by the abundant supply of "oysters, salads, game pastries, fruits, cake, wines . . . arranged with a most gorgeous display of china, glass, and silver." Brooks wondered if Stanton's "little, aristocratic wife," Ellen, was depleting the fortune Stanton had accumulated as a lawyer.

At 2 p.m., Lincoln, wearily finished with his own reception, returned to his office. Seward and his son Fred soon joined the president, carrying the corrected proclamation in a large portfolio. Not wishing to delay any longer, Lincoln commenced the signing. As the parchment was unrolled before him, he "took a pen, dipped it in ink, moved his hand to the place for the signature," but then, his hand trembling, he stopped and put the pen down.

"I never, in my life, felt more certain that I was doing right, than I do in signing this paper," he said. "If my name ever goes into history it will be for this act, and my whole soul is in it." His arm was "stiff and numb" after shaking hands for hours, however. "If my hand trembles when I sign the Proclamation," Lincoln said, "all who examine the document hereafter will say, 'He hesitated.'" So the president waited a moment and then took up the pen once more, "slowly and carefully" writing his name. "The signature proved to be unusually bold, clear, and firm, even for him," Fred Seward recalled, "and a laugh followed, at his apprehensions." The secretary of state added his own name and carried it back to the State Department, where the great seal of the United States was affixed before copies were sent out to the press.

In cities and towns all across the North, people had anxiously waited for word of Lincoln's action. At Tremont Temple in Boston, an audience of 3,000 had gathered since morning, anticipating "the first flash of the electric wires." Frederick Douglass was there, along with two other anti-slavery leaders, John S. Rock and Anna Dickinson. At the nearby Music Hall, another crowd had formed, including the authors Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Ralph Waldo Emerson, John Greenleaf Whittier, Harriet Beecher Stowe and Oliver Wendell Holmes. "Every moment of waiting chilled our hopes, and strengthened our fears," Douglass recalled. "A line of messengers" connected the telegraph office with the platform at Tremont Temple, and although the time was passed with speeches, as it reached nine and then ten o'clock without any word, "a visible shadow" fell upon the crowd.

"On the side of doubt," Douglass recalled, "it was said that Mr. Lincoln's kindly nature might cause him to relent at the last moment." It was rumored that Mary Lincoln, "coming from an old slaveholding family," might have persuaded him to "give the slaveholders one other chance." These speculations, which "had absolutely no foundation," hurt Mary "to the quick," her niece Katherine noted.

Finally, after 10 p.m., when the anxiety at Tremont Temple "was becoming agony," a man raced through the crowd. "It is coming! It is on the wires!" Douglass would long remember the "wild and grand" reaction, the shouts of "joy and glad-



Many freed slaves joined Army units (Company E of the 4th U.S. Colored Infantry at Fort Lincoln, Washington, D.C., in 1865).

ness," the sobs and tears. The happy crowd celebrated till dawn. A similar elation poured forth in the Music Hall. "It was a sublime moment," Eliza S. Quincy, daughter of Harvard University's 15th president, Josiah Quincy, wrote Mary; "the thought of the millions upon millions of human beings whose happiness was to be affected & freedom secured by the words of President Lincoln, was almost overwhelming."

In Washington, a crowd of well-wishers gathered at the White House to applaud Lincoln's action. The president came to the window and silently bowed to the crowd. The signed proclamation rendered words unnecessary. While its immediate effects were limited, since it applied only to enslaved blacks behind Rebel lines—nationwide abolition would wait until the 13th Amendment was ratified, in December 1865—the Emancipation Proclamation changed forever the relationship of the national government to slavery. Where slavery had been protected by the national government, it was now "under its ban." The armed forces that had returned fugitive slaves to bondage would be employed in securing their freedom. "Whatever partial reverses may attend its progress," the *Boston Daily Evening Transcript* predicted, "Slavery from this hour ceases to be a po-

litical power in the country." Ohio congressman-elect James Garfield agreed, though he retained a low opinion of Lincoln, doubtless shaped by his close friendship with Chase. "Strange phenomenon in the world's history," he wrote, "when a second-rate Illinois lawyer is the instrument to utter words which shall form an epoch memorable in all future ages."

Lincoln did not need any such confirmation of the historic nature of the edict. "Fellow-citizens," he had said in his annual message to Congress in December, "*we* cannot escape history. We of this Congress and this administration, will be remembered in spite of ourselves. No personal significance, or insignificance, can spare one or another of us. The fiery trial through which we pass, will light us down, in honor or dishonor, to the latest generation."

When his old friend Joshua Speed next came to visit, Lincoln reminded him of the suicidal depression he had suffered two decades earlier, and of his disclosure that he would gladly die but that he "had done nothing to make any human being remember that he had lived." Now, indicating his Emancipation Proclamation, he declared: "I believe that in this measure . . . my fondest hopes will be realized." ○