

Hesitant emancipator- lincoln essay sample

[Sociology](#), [Slavery](#)



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Never boring: simple words that describe the simple life of one of the greatest American Heroes of all time. Over the years we have come to understand the Great Emancipator's struggles and his determination to push for a better future for his nation. In the blink of war, Lincoln came to the nation's rescue. But was Lincoln really the Great Emancipator? Was Lincoln actually opposed to the slavery movement? Or did he not consider the blacks to be an equal race? Did he make an active effort to free the slaves? Or was the emancipation a never Lincoln's priority? In my opinion, although freeing the slaves was never Lincoln's top priority during his tenure as president, Lincoln was sympathetic towards them. His main issue was the war and the probability of the union getting split into two. I believe that Lincoln may not have always seen the black race as equals and that the emancipation came about as a by-product of the Union getting saved.

In this essay, I came across a large number of sources. Many of which were directly related to my topic, which left me with a lot of information to process and a large number of examples to prove the point I wished to prove. My selections of sources reflect the examples that I chose to use, and help me establish clear points.

My view of Lincoln has always been that of a strong and wise statesman. His arguments have been fair and logical and they reflect his intellectual nature. Scholar David Lightner writes about Lincoln's intellectual attributes his work, ' Abraham Lincoln and Equality, which is mentioned in the Journal of the Historic Society of Illinois. Lightner mentions in his journal that Lincoln was " far more enlightened than commonly supposed" [9]. This supports my claim of Lincoln's rather logical take on issues of his time.

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This logicity of Lincoln's thoughts is even more evident in his note, 'Fragments of Slavery'. Here, Lincoln breaks down the entire essence of slavery. Lincoln fights the arguments of superiority of race, color or intellect upon which slavery held firm ground. Lincoln asks, "If A. can prove, however conclusively, that he may, of right, enslave B. Why may not B. snatch the same argument, and prove equally, that he may enslave A?" [1]. Here, Lincoln's questions the logicity behind the premise of slavery. He explains that every man, in his lifetime, shall always encounter someone who is lighter skinned, more intelligent or socially superior to him. This does not mean that one is liable to be the other's slave. This counter argument made by Lincoln led me to believe that Lincoln was certainly not for the slavery movement. But this also does not shed any light as to whether Lincoln was against this immoral practice.

Upon reading this brief note by Lincoln, one would presume that he was the type who would not give much importance to sentiment or emotion. His words and explanations in the note, 'Fragment on Slavery' [1] is a logical representation of his thoughts. Not once did Lincoln, in this note, show any signs of sympathy for the slaves or and anger towards the slave owners. This made me question Lincoln's entire stance on the anti-slavery movement. I saw him as politician who was not going to be emotionally compromised. Scholar David Lightner writes in the Journal entry, that Lincoln "did not seem to have the moral conviction that inspired his opposition to slavery" [9]. Lightner sees Lincoln as a politician who wasn't morally inspired to tackle the slavery issue. However, Scholar Phillip Shaw Paludan would disagree with him.

In Phillip Shaw Paludan's work on 'Lincoln and Negro Slavery', he clearly says that he doesn't feel that a lot more can be added to what we already know on Lincoln's take on Slavery [10]. Paludan thought that Lincoln believed that slavery was an immoral evil and that it threatened the union. Paludan talks about Lincoln having taken two trips down the Mississippi to New Orleans, one in 1828 and another in 1831. On the first trip, Lincoln told Allen Gentry that; "If I ever get a lick at that thing [slavery] I'll hit it hard." [10] This reference shows Lincoln's building hatred towards slavery. Maybe Lincoln was emotionally hurt by the treatment of the slaves that he witnessed down South and this sparked his hatred towards its existence. This reference is crucial because it tells me that Lincoln wasn't entirely unsympathetic towards slavery. Paludan later quotes John Hanks' experiences with Lincoln in New Orleans as a shock towards slavery:

"There it was we saw Negroes chained—maltreated—whipt & scourged. Lincoln saw it—his heart bled—said nothing much—was silent from feeling—was sad—looked bad—felt bad—was thoughtful & abstracted—I can say knowingly that it was on this trip that he formed his opinions of slavery: it ran its iron in him then & there—May 1831. I have heard him say—often & often. [10]"

It seems clear that Lincoln never expected to see such brutality. Hanks' reference that Lincoln's "heart bled" [10] is a clear indication that Lincoln felt pain when he saw the brutal treatment that the slaves were going through. Later in a letter to Joshua Speed in 1855, Lincoln says that, "[the mentioned] sight was a continued torment to me; and I see something like it

every time I touch the Ohio, or any other slave-border [11].” Lincoln’s words here clearly indicate a deep sense of sympathy towards the slaves. Lincoln clearly says that he opposes slavery and that was “ because [his] judgment and feelings so prompt [him]” [10]. Lincoln’s subtle reference to his judgment being one of the reasons for his opposition towards slavery refer back to his note, ‘ Fragment on Slavery’ where he breaks apart slavery’s logicity.

Although Lincoln was opposed to enslaving the African Americans, it is possible that he may never have considered them equals. In the late 1850’s, Lincoln was known to have a similar theme in his speeches, where he made it clear to the people that he did not consider the blacks to be an equal race. He wanted to set them free, but Lincoln wanted to have them shipped off to Africa rather than have them live within the union. In his 1858 campaign in Illinois for the Senate against Stephen Douglas, Lincoln spoke to his listeners and said: “ Let us discard all this quibbling about this man and the other man, this race and that race and the other race being inferior. Let us discard all these things, and unite as one people throughout this land, until we shall once more stand up declaring that all men are created equal.[12]” Lincoln clearly said what he did to please his listeners. Out bursts the politician and statesman in Lincoln. A few months later in Southern Illinois, a very different Lincoln said:

“ I will say, then, that I am not, nor ever have been, in favor of bringing about in any way the social and political equality of the white and black races; that I am not, nor ever have been, in favor of making voters or jurors

of negroes, nor of qualifying them to hold office, nor to intermarry with white people. And while they do remain together there must be the position of superior and inferior, and I as much as any other man am in favor of having the superior position assigned to the white race. [13]"

This rather unexpected stance taken by Lincoln took me aback. The Great Emancipator clearly doesn't take the black race to be an equal. His desire to not give the black people any social or political power or rights pushes me to question his Greatness and his position in History. His views on white and black equality do not reflect the title that was bestowed upon him. Lightner, in his journal entry clearly says that," Lincoln did not think much of the [Black's] abilities outside of slavery" [9]. Lightner feels that Lincoln opposed slavery because it was a " stain on the nation's honor" [9]. Considering the fact that Lincoln was a deep-rooted constitutionalist and a patriot, it is possible that Lightner may be correct.

It is also possible that Lincoln said what he did to gain the trust of the people by misleading them on his personal beliefs and aims. It makes sense for an aspiring politician who wanted to gain national leadership, to mislead the people on his take on social equality. Writer John Stauffer in his book, 'Giants: The Parallel Lives of Frederick Douglass & Abraham Lincoln', gives us an interesting approach to these personal beliefs. In this book Stauffer clearly mentions that Frederick Douglass was welcomed into the white house. This gesture signifies Lincoln's egalitarian side. This gesture of welcoming the black community into the white house shows Lincoln as a

leader who supported the equality of the two races, a much different view than what Lincoln expressed himself in his speeches.

Douglass himself felt welcomed by Lincoln and he felt “humbled and not reminded of his unpopular color” [5] by the interactions he had with Lincoln. Douglass said that the president “opened the White House to black visitors in a way that set aside all precedent.” [5] Douglass said that for the president, the black people were “only his stepchildren. [5]” The president had received Douglass just as “one gentleman receives another”[5].

Douglass’ experiences give us a different understanding of Lincoln. This makes me believe that to advance the cause of equality within the nation and to fight slavery, Lincoln might have been compelled to hide from the people of his nation, his true egalitarian beliefs.

Scholars might argue on many of Lincoln’s principles but not many would disagree with the fact that he was a deep-rooted constitutionalist and traditionalist. I cherish these qualities in Lincoln. It is not unknown that Lincoln would often refer back to the Declaration and the Constitution. He respected the will of the founding fathers and went by the Constitution as much as he could. I came across one such instance of this constitutionalism in Lincoln by studying the speech he made at Kalamazoo. On August 27th 1856, at his speech at Kalamazoo in Michigan, Lincoln said to the people, “Don’t interfere with anything in the constitution. That must be maintained, for it is the only safe guard of our liberties” [2]. This speech made by Lincoln is important because it represents Lincoln’s continuous efforts to ignite love for the constitution within the people of the nation.

When Lincoln became President, he took it as an opportunity to fulfill his lifelong dream of completing the work of the Founding Fathers. Lincoln had built up this love and respect for the Constitution through the years. He believed that it was his duty, as president, to continue the work of the founding fathers. In his first inaugural address, he quoted the constitution many times and he clearly told the people that, “ the Constitution itself expressly enjoins upon me... this I deem to be a duty on my part and I shall perform it” [3]. Critic Herman Belz would agree with me. In his work, ‘ Lincoln and the Constitution’, he talks about Lincoln’s determination “ to preserve the nation by preserving the Constitution” [8]. Belz says that, “ the Constitution, in Lincoln’s view, was not an organic and unwritten thing” [8]. Lincoln believed that the Constitution was the most important “ document handed down by the Fathers”. He realized that the “ Constitution was the underlying character of America as a political entity” [8]. With such conviction, Lincoln took office.

After Lincoln took office, the most important issue of the time that needed attention was the secession of the southern states. This secession took place as a result of a series of clashes between the North and the South. Although this clash was not over slavery as a moral institution, it could have been over slavery’s expansion into the west. Sadly, at that time, not many northerners cared deeply about slavery, and not certainly not deeply enough to go to war on it. The Southern states’ secession was due to the southern people feeling that their way of life could be threatened. The northern reformers pushed for economic expansion. They wanted free land and free labor. They wanted a free market and protective tariffs to support the manufacturers. The slave

interests opposed all that. Eventually the Confederacy was formed and the Civil War began. Lincoln tried to regain the faith of the Southerners through his inaugural speech.

He said that he had “ no institution to interfere with slavery where it exists” [3]. He tried to make them believe that as a President to a unified country, he would be fair to all its voting citizens. But this issue would not stop here. Lincoln, being the traditionalist and constitutionalist that he was knew that a rift between the northern and southern states would result in a split of the union. He made it clear that his primary objective was to save the union at all costs. He has shown no emotion in this matter. Rather, in a letter to Horace Greeley, Lincoln explains that his paramount objective in the struggle was to “ save the union and was not either to save or destroy slavery. If he could save the union by freeing the slaves, he would do it. And if he could save the union by freeing no slaves, he would do that too” [4]. It is clear at this moment that his only goal was to save the Union. What happened to the slaves and to the slave owners in the south was not his concern at the moment. But then again attacking slavery would mean following the Constitution, which allowed Slavery in the south.

The traditionalist in Lincoln did not want his country split in two. But the war grew bitter and casualties mounted. As the war continued, petitions from abolitionists increased, pushing for emancipation. In this heated situation, Lincoln began to act against slavery. On September 22nd 1862, Abraham Lincoln declared the “ slaves free” in the Final Emancipation Proclamation [6]. Lincoln understood that the only way to save the union was to take a

final stand of slavery in the south and prevent it from spreading to the west. Today, Lincoln is remembered in history as the man who freed the slaves. But in the chaos of the war, it was coincidental that the slaves were freed. Even critic Lightner feels that “ Lincoln’s opposition towards slavery was so moderate and ineffectual that he hardly deserves the great title of the Great Emancipator” [9]. But the freeing of the slaves was followed by the defeat of the South. Lincoln had “ lead to a new birth of freedom and that the government of the people, by the people, for the people would not perish under the earth” [7].

Lincoln’s pursuit of fulfilling the founding fathers’ dreams and keeping the union united in the wake of a major civil war, that would alter the course of American history, has made him the iconic figure we remember him to be. Studying Lincoln has made me realize that he was a complex figure. Lincoln might have opposed slavery but he never treated the African American race as equals. He made it clear to the people that he considered the whites to be the superior race. But hidden behind his egalitarian beliefs was a politician with deep-rooted love for the nation. Lincoln may not have prioritized freeing the slaves, but when the nation needed it to be done, Lincoln came through. In the pursuit to save the Union, Lincoln emancipated the slaves. This rather chaotic chain of events leaves us with many different ways to interpret Lincoln’s personality. I personally believe that this gives us space to find our own Lincoln within him. Lincoln’s death was a huge blow to the nation; he might be gone, but his love for his country still inspires us.

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