

# Abraham Lincoln's attitude towards slavery

[Politics](#), [President](#)



" From a genuine abolition point of view, Mr. Lincoln seemed tardy, cold, dull and indifferent, but measuring him by the sentiment of his country - a sentiment he was bound as a statesman to discuss - he was swift, zealous, radical, and determined. " Frederick Douglass, 1876 source?

## **Introduction**

He survived the tragedy and depression to become America's Greatest President. He had the courage to destroy slavery, but he took a Civil War and the loss of 600, 000 lives; his beliefs cost him his life, but without him the United States of America would not exist today. Abraham Lincoln, America's model hero, was a man whose courage saved the nation from destruction. His early life was poor and brutal; he was born on the 12th of February 1809 in a one room cabin in rural Kentucky, a frontier state of America. His family were farmers, he was the first of his family to read; Abraham Lincoln was different to from his friends.

The young Lincoln was a child of induce curiosity, he loved to hear people, gave well crafted, well delivered speeches. He would often go to places where such speeches were being made; he memorized parts of them and he would come back and give those speeches to his playmates. It was in Lincoln's nature to embrace new experiences and when he was nineteen he had the opportunity to travel 1200 miles down the Mississippi river. It was a journey that will change his outlook of life forever. He was confronted with the realities of slavery; what he did see was probably the most horrific aspect of slavery and that as the destruction of slave families, the selling of slaves and the use of slaves literally as pieces of commerce. But when he

returned to the North, Lincoln left the family home striking out the most exciting town of its day, New Salem - Illinois; here he would be his own man. When he came to New Salem, that was a deliberate choice on his part, to turn his back on the world of farming, the agrarian lifestyle, and coming to New Salem is really a deliberate choice to plunge himself into the world of 19th century of commerce, capitalism, the Industrial Revolution and everything like that.

Lincoln's passion to reading continued into his adult life and so that his ideas of fairness will becoming increasingly developed; America was changing, expanding day by day, and Lincoln wanted to be part of it. By 1847 he had studied enough to pass the bar examination, he had decided to become a lawyer. But also he plunged in the world of politics, and he loved politics even more than law because for him law was a means to politics, and his practice as a lawyer was always bound up by his political ambitions. In Illinois he met a woman named Ann Rutledge, but Lincoln's life took a tragic turn when Ann died.

Her death plunged Lincoln into a deep depression, but hard work overcame this black spells. He had become a successful local politician, and the ambitious young Lincoln was proving difficult to ignore. Lincoln, had an extraordinary talent and he quickly established himself as a charismatic speaker and talented politician; increasingly ambitious he decided to move again, leaving New Salem he went to live in Springfield - the State Capital of Illinois and there he met and married Mary Todd. Lincoln moved on to the National stage, becoming a Congressman for the District of Illinois.

The country was uneasily divided into 15 free and 15 slave states; when Kansas wanted to join the Union, a fierce debate appeared: should it be a slave state or not? In the South it was another commodity that was the key to the slave issue: cotton. By 1840, cotton was more valuable than everything else the United States of America exported put together. By 1860, the value of slaves (were about four millions slaves) was greater than the value of all the American railroads, all the American manufactures and all the American banking put together - slavery was the main event in the America.

Lincoln was always opposed to the slavery, because it was the contradiction of his yearning for transformation and self improvement. In 1858 Abraham Lincoln decided to candidate for the United States Senate. At the beginning to the campaign, he made a speech in which he said that the United States was a House, but a House Divided by slavery; to survive it would have to be either all free or all slaves. When he candidate for the presidency of the United States, more than anything else I think he won because for those people who were opposed to slavery he was the only choice.

From my point of view Abraham Lincoln was completely opposed to slavery because, from historical point of view at that time slavery was the answer at to the disputes between free states and slave states. After the Civil War, the North was developing through commerce and its new industrial capacities, meanwhile the South was flourishing through the cost of labor - manual labor and the use of slaves.

## **The Issue Of Slavery In The United States Of America**

The issue of slavery represented one of the most important factors which shaped the history of the US and especially the way in which it came to develop. It was seen for many decades as a subject for social upheaval, political debate, and most importantly a matter of human rights. However, regardless of the historical nature of the issues discussed in these debates, there are certain personalities which influenced, in a positive or negative way, the entire debate.

In the case of slavery, one such personality was Abraham Lincoln one of the most important personalities of the country and at the same time an essential part in the debates on slavery. Although his name is often related to the Emancipation Proclamation or to his debates with Stephen Douglas, his beliefs on the issue of slavery stand above these acts or events. In this sense, he often argued his opposition to the "peculiar institution" despite the fact that he was not a stranger to the slavery phenomenon.

Still, his beliefs and conviction make him to this day one of the most representative figures of the emancipation of slaves throughout the US. In order to have a better understanding of the actual reasons which justify the fact that Abraham Lincoln considered slavery to be wrong, it is important to consider the historical background of the era and observe slavery in a wider framework. More precisely, Lincoln's beliefs on slavery were the result of growing tensions between two rival concepts: free and slavery state. After the end of the Civil War, the North was developing through trade and exploiting its new industrial capabilities, while the South was thriving at the cost of manual labor, through its special commercial relations with the

English but more importantly through the use of slaves. As a consequence, the local landscape was different: New York was ranked the dominant and the most populated urban area, where as in the South a significant urban area was represented only by New Orleans. These economic tensions made their mark on the way in which politicians and even local people came to understand the status of black people.

At the same time though, the new American nation was built on the principles of freedom, democracy and most importantly on human rights. The Declaration of Independence Lincoln often cited stated included the famous passage on the freedom of man. Thus, " all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness"[1]. Despite the fact that these words represented the enthusiasm of the Founding Fathers and that they are even today the framework of the American democracy, at the time they were easily interpretable.

This was largely due to the fact that slavery was seen in the North as a terrible wrongdoing, while in the South it was viewed as a necessary practice. This drew the attention on the way in which black people were treated and especially to the fact that they were not considered human beings endowed with inalienable rights and freedoms, as well as civil duties and political ones. Taking these aspects into account it can be said that the discussions on slavery in which Lincoln was engaged focused on two pillars.

On the one hand, there were the political discussions with the Democrats and especially with his direct opponent, Douglas; on the other hand, there were the moral issues Lincoln brought on the issue of slavery. However,  
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these debates intermingled as Lincoln and Douglas became engaged in the political fight for the state of Illinois. While these confrontations had a political aim, they brought into the spotlight two different views on slavery and emphasized Lincoln's moral convictions and the way in which these would change. The Civil War played a major part in the drafting of Lincoln's opinion on the issue of slavery.

In this sense, he used the notion in order to rally support for the unity of the nation. Thus, he points out that " we all declare for liberty; but in using the same word we do not all mean the same thing. With some the word liberty may mean for each man to do as he pleases with himself and the produce of his labor; while with others the same word may mean to do what they please with other men and the produce of other men's labor". This was the main argument he used against the beliefs of the Democrats. However, the discussions were held at the political level mostly.

In this sense, the argument in fact represented a means through which Lincoln pointed out the fact that while the Republicans were the proponents of a stronger role for the federal government, the Democrats supported the idea of a looser central government. In the end the discussions came down to the issue of slavery in the sense that the Republicans were in favor of abolishing slavery in certain states, while the Democrats considered that the people must decide on whether the states should be free or should allow slavery and slave trade to take place.

The moral argument Lincoln used revolved around the issue of the wrongfulness of slavery. In this sense, he constantly pointed out that " I particularly object to the new position which the avowed principle of this

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Nebraska law gives to slavery in the body politic. I object to it because it assumes that there can be moral right in the enslaving of one man by another. I object to it as a dangerous dalliance for a free people—a sad evidence that, feeling prosperity, we forget right”.

It is rather hard to believe the fact that the moral aspect determined Lincoln to support the abolition of slavery. The times were rather difficult for the entire nation due to the tensions between the two sides of the country. The North and the South were being divided by an issue on which people could not be convinced through moral arguments. Nonetheless, Lincoln went on saying that the mere arguments promoted by the Democrats in support of slavery were not convincing either. Thus, necessity in his view cannot be considered an argument because it is the man who decides on his own necessities.

In this sense, while Douglas throughout his arguments points out the fact that the right of the people to choose over the issue of slavery is a God-given right, Lincoln counters him by appealing to the idea of right and wrong yet again. More precisely, “God did not place good and evil before man, telling him to make his choice. On the contrary, he did tell him there was one tree of the fruit of which he should not eat, upon pain of certain death. I should scarcely wish so strong a prohibition against slavery in Nebraska”. The technique used by Lincoln to include the idea of religion and of divine justice was a crucial point he made in his argument against slavery and a point he used in trying to determine the change in attitude towards the change in the way slaves were viewed and their treatment as human beings rather than as cattle or mere objects or property. The fact that his arguments were based



on moral considerations was an issue that became clear during the presidency of Abraham Lincoln. Despite the fact that he is considered to be an emancipator, he never actually advocated the idea of emancipation, but rather a reconsideration of their status.

This is an evident fact, especially from the point of view of his later statements. In this sense, he later argued that " I have never understood that the presidency conferred upon me the unrestricted right to act officially upon this judgment and feeling" considering that the moral issues he advocated did not have to become state principles. This viewed summarizes the changes that took place at the level of his policy once he became president of the United States.

### **The Emancipation Proclamation**

He promoted the wrongfulness of slavery as an immoral act; yet he did not support the actual emancipation of the black people. His views became clearer and they can easily be summed up by one of his statements. Thus, " I protest against the counterfeit logic which concludes that because I do not want a black woman for a slave, I must necessarily want her for a wife. I need not have her for either, I can just leave her alone. In some respects, she is certainly not my equal; but in her natural right to eat the bread she earns with her own hands without asking leave of anyone else, she is my equal, and the equal of all others ". Therefore, he viewed slaves equal only in their state of birth not in their rights as part of the society.

This view represents an important aspect in the way in which his attitude changed in time. Thus, as a candidate for a particular region of the United

States, regardless of its importance, he could promote the morality of slavery or its lack. However, as a major public figure, he did not have the political support or the democratic one to advocate the freedom of the slaves. Nor did he want to take that road. One of the most evident proofs was the fact that " Lincoln in the first year of the war repeatedly defined his policy as a restoration of the Union- which of course meant a Union with slavery". Therefore, despite the noble discourse, neither Lincoln nor the public were ready for a change that would, on the one hand uphold the Declaration of Independence, and create disequilibrium in the Union. Despite the serious oscillations Lincoln experienced throughout discussion on slavery, the issue of the empowerment of slaves was addressed in 1865 as he pointed out that " it is also unsatisfactory to some that the elective franchise is not given to the colored man.

I would myself prefer that it were now conferred on the very intelligent and on those who serve our cause as soldiers". This change in attitude can be considered to be the result of a thorough reflection on the role played by slaves in the Civil War. This particular aspect was dealt with in his Second Inaugural Address as he pointed out the fact that the war in itself was a punishment from God, one which must be understood as a sign of reconciliation. More precisely, " The Almighty has His own purposes.

Woe unto the world because of offenses; for it must needs be that offenses come, but woe to that man by whom the offense cometh. If we shall suppose that American slavery is one of those offenses which, in the providence of God, must needs come, but which, having continued through His appointed time, He now wills to remove, and that He gives to both North and South this

terrible war as the woe due to those by whom the offense came, shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a living God always ascribe to Him. The answer to such a question was in Lincoln's view one that the nation must act according to God's will and offer the rights to all individuals " who have prayed to the same Bible. Although his arguments were yet again morally based and in touch with religion, he pointed out the necessity of considering slaves as human beings with the same God as white people. Overall, it can be said that the political background of Abraham Lincoln's activity was important for the way in which he managed to construct his beliefs on the issue of slavery.

Although at times he reduced the enthusiasm for the reconsideration of the conditions of the black people, he tried to promote a new direction in the discussions on the matter by introducing the element of morality related to slavery. Towards the end of his presidency however he came to acknowledge the role slaves played in waging the Civil War, in winning it and most importantly the role they must have in healing the wounds of the new nation. Well organized and well written paper, but the absence of references for large section raises the question of academic honesty.

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