

Brief analysis of the emancipation proclamation history essay



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The Emancipation Proclamation was one of the most earth-shattering events for slaves in America. However, despite the changes it created, there were many repercussions and issues also generated by this legislation that led to what eventually became known as the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960's. Slavery is by no means a new concept to civilization. As far back as the Early Egyptians slavery was a practiced and accepted method of developing resources and conquering other countries. When the empires would fight, the victor would often force the people that had been subjugated to return back to the conquering country and serve as slaves for the aristocrats and upper middle classes.

The history of African American slavery in the United States can be divided into two periods: the first coincided with the colonial years, about 1650 to 1790; the second lasted from American independence through the Civil War, 1790 to 1865. Prior to independence, slavery existed in all the American colonies and therefore was not an issue of sectional debate. With the arrival of independence, however, the new Northern states—those of New England along with New York, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey—came to see slavery as contradictory to the ideals of the Revolution and instituted programs of gradual emancipation. Part of the reasons why slavery could be abolished more easily in the North was because there were far fewer slaves in those states, and they were not a key part of the Northern economy. (Budros 2005) There were plenty of free white men to do the sort of labor slaves performed. In fact, the main demand for abolition of slavery came not from those who found it wrong but from white working-class men who did not want slaves as rivals for their jobs. One could pay a slave much less to do the same job as a

white man, and the white man in the North wanted the jobs and was trying to eliminate the competition.

However, circumstances in the newly formed Southern states were quite different. The African American population both slave and free was much larger. In Virginia and South Carolina in 1790 nearly half of the population was of African descent. Other Southern states also had large black minorities. Also, as a result of ingrained racial prejudice and ignorance about the traditions and cultures in Africa from which many of their slaves came, Southern whites were convinced that free blacks would be savages-a direct physical threat to white survival, in addition to creating problems with cases of intermarriage and the co-existence of the races. There was no convincing that the blacks would ever be as worthy as the whites, so Southerners believed that slavery was necessary as a means of race control and having a harmonious community.

Of equal importance in the Southern states was the economic role that slaves played. These states were much more dependent on the agricultural sector of their economies than were Northern ones. Much of the wealth of Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, the Carolinas, and Georgia came from the cash crops that slaves grew. As a result, many white Southerners did not believe white men should do the backbreaking labor required to produce tobacco, cotton, rice, and indigo, which were the regions chief cash crops.

These are some of the factors why the Southern states were determined to retain slavery after the Revolution. Thus began the division between “ free states” and “ slave states” that led to sectionalism and, ultimately, to civil

war. However, it was not until the actual signing of the Emancipation Proclamation that the stakes for this hotly debated issue came to a forefront.

While Abraham Lincoln didn't specifically believe in exactly equal treatment for blacks and whites, he did believe very strongly in the right of humans to be free. Some of the many problems created by the Emancipation Proclamation ranged from the actual legality of the order to the application of its intent. Lincoln was politically astute enough to realize that the timing and perception of it was all important. There were many critics at the time that said why not sooner - his reply was that the public was still not ready to accept the fact. "Public sentiment is everything," he had declared during the 1858 Lincoln-Douglas debates. "With public sentiment, nothing can fail; without it nothing can succeed. Consequently he who molds public sentiment goes deeper than he who enacts statutes or pronounces decisions." (Holzer 2009) Slavery was a very important issue during his election because of the tremendous economic and social impact that it had on the Southern and even Northern economy. Even so, the critics of Lincoln and the Emancipation Proclamation are technically correct in observing that the proclamation in January 1863 did not legally free a single slave. Slavery's end required a constitutional amendment, which Lincoln advocated and which was ratified as the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865. However, the importance of the Emancipation Proclamation should not be underestimated. With this order, Lincoln silenced his abolitionist critics in the North, defused interventionist sentiment abroad, and energized black slave resisters to continue their efforts in the South. This also goes to show that the perception, which

Lincoln so eloquently craved, was what he achieved when he signed the aforementioned Emancipation Proclamation.

From the Emancipation Proclamation to the end of the Civil War was the time period necessary to have all slaves freed, and even after Lee's surrender it took time for the Deep or Lower South to truly accept and apply the legislation of the Thirteenth Amendment. By the time 1868 came around, along with the Fourteenth Amendment ratifying the rights of blacks as legal citizens, the first foundations had been laid to the process of truly freeing the blacks. Segregation started to become an issue, and the infamous Jim Crow laws are started in certain rural areas. While the Supreme Court establishes 'separate but equal' doctrine with Plessy vs. Ferguson in 1896, blacks in the north were starting to join universities, become more educated, and become lawyers and doctors. This led to many problems in the Lower South, because this law enabled the expansion of growing segregation or "Jim Crow" practices across America, with many states codifying segregation in state constitutions and local laws and ordinances. (Weatherford 2000) By 1910, every state in the former Confederacy had fully established a system of legalized segregation and disfranchisement. The country was mostly embracing the notion of white supremacy, which re-enforced the cult of "whiteness" that predated the Civil War. Even in some Northern areas "Jim Crow" practices were accepted and some were codified into law.

One of the next major steps against segregation took place when Truman issued Executive Order 9808, establishing the President's Committee on Civil Rights to propose measures to strengthen and protect civil rights. Truman appointed to the Committee leading black civil rights activist, Sadie

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Alexander, the first black woman to earn a PhD and an early leader in the Philadelphia Urban League. Its report, *To Secure These Rights*, led to Truman's orders to end segregation in the U. S. military and federal Civil Service system. Later in the 1960's President Johnson enlarged Truman's efforts with various civil rights and affirmative action laws to address persistent discrimination in both the federal and private sectors as well. Again, these were many small steps, but still the main issues and intent of the separate yet equal doctrine held firm thorough the United States. A stronger step against segregation was when the United States Supreme Court, in the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision declared segregation in public schools illegal. Even so, it would take more than just small steps to truly start what one could term a real movement for civil equality.

While slavery was no longer even an option in America, the shadow it was casting still affected the everyday life and society as a whole. It would take major events throughout the unrest in the late 50's and early 60's to truly bring home the necessity for change. One such event was the arrest and brief jailing of Rosa Parks, a woman highly respected in the black community, and the boycott that followed led to a U. S. Supreme Court decision outlawing segregation on city buses. The boycott also raised to national prominence a youthful, little-known minister named Martin Luther King Jr. Under his leadership, the boycott set a pattern for nonviolent, community-based protest that became a successful strategy in the civil rights movement. It was not only the beginning of the civil rights movement, but overall, the country was ready for change. (Davis 1966) The Vietnam

War was being fought, and in the previously desegregated armed forces blacks were being sent off to fight and distinguishing themselves honorably. The era of love, peace and equality was being promoted by the ' Woodstock' movement. The younger generations were ready to question the status quo and to make the necessary changes to bring the nation closer to a true freedom for all, regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation or social standing.

The best description of the country was the many faces of the protests that took place during this time, many under famous leaders such as Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. Dr. King said " I refuse to accept the view that mankind is so tragically bound to the starless midnight of racism and war that the bright daybreak of peace and brotherhood can never become a reality... I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word." His message of non-aggression was a far cry from the violence that freed the slaves from the Civil War to all the ensuing conflicts up until World War II. Throughout his many speeches, orations, sermons and demonstrations, Dr. King never changed his pacifist beliefs in the power of change empowered by the people, and above all, empowered by love. Gone were the days of the Jim Crow Laws and there were beginnings of change throughout the country. Even though his assassination drew much furor, it also served to catalyze his greatest dream. " I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.

I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made straight and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together.

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood." This segment from his famous " I Have A Dream" speech truly sums up the vision that the country was developing through the late 60's.

Overall, even though one can still make a very strong case for discrimination and racial hatred even in today's society, the events started by the simplicity of Abraham Lincoln's signature on the Emancipation Proclamation culminated in a society that willingly accepts all races as equals, and provides opportunities to those from all cultures and racial origins to achieve their own American dream. Dr. Martin Luther King would have been so proud of the country that has come out of the ashes of the Civil War, and President Lincoln can at last rest knowing that his vision not only became reality, but has expanded to a depth of freedom and personal liberty that not even him or other abolitionists had the foresight to envision when the Emancipation Proclamation was signed. Unfortunately, most of the debates today now center on the validity of reparations and how long should a nation carry the guilt for people that were wronged in past history. (Arceneaux 2005) While some feel that since slavery was part of history for over a hundred years and the reparations should also cover a similar period, others feel that the only true reparation is to constantly work to educate and ensure that any form of

intolerance or discrimination is never repeated, especially on the national level like the issue of slavery was in the nation's historical past.

It is also true that the past is what shapes the future, and the descendants of the slaves may have seen the difficulties of life during the segregation, and even during the times of the Civil Rights movement - yet they were free to do what they wanted and achieved what they dreamed. Granted, true equality has been reached the more we as a culture and society have moved into the 20th century, but the building blocks of freedom were laid as far back as the Revolutionary War, cemented with the mortar of the Emancipation Proclamation, and ratified by the success of the Civil Rights Movement. It is also due to these internal struggles that now we as a nation look outward and are becoming more increasingly concerned about human rights overall, not just as a means of pushing the world toward democracy, but to throw light on the truly human right of freedom, regardless of what shape or form it takes.