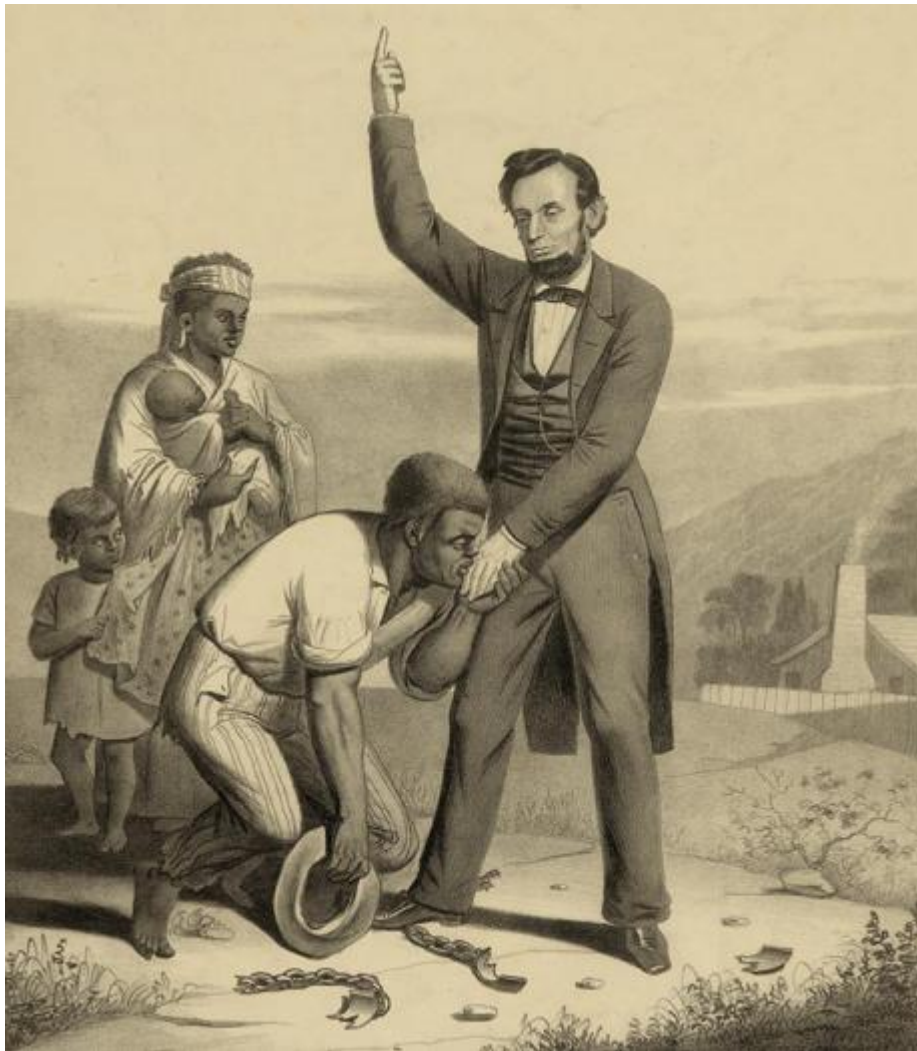


Lincoln and Emancipation - Howard Zinn



Historian Howard Zinn on Abraham Lincoln and the eventual abolition of slavery in the US. Which shows that Spielberg's new film, Lincoln, is far from historically accurate.

[John Brown](#) was executed by the state of Virginia with the approval of the national government. It was the national government which, while weakly enforcing the law ending the slave trade, sternly enforced the laws providing for the return of fugitives to slavery. It was the national government that, in Andrew Jackson's administration, collaborated with the South to keep abolitionist literature out of the mails in the southern states. It was the Supreme Court of the United States that declared in 1857 that the slave Dred Scott could not sue for his freedom because he was not a person, but property.

Such a national government would never accept an end to slavery by rebellion. It would end slavery only under conditions controlled by whites, and only when required by the political and economic needs of the business elite of the North. It was Abraham Lincoln who combined perfectly the needs of business, the political ambition of the new Republican party, and the rhetoric of humanitarianism. He would keep the abolition of slavery not at the top of his list of priorities, but close enough to the top so it could be pushed there temporarily by abolitionist pressures and by practical political advantage.

Lincoln could skillfully blend the interests of the very rich and the interests of the black at a moment in history when these interests met. And he could link these two with a growing section of Americans, the white, up-and-coming, economically ambitious, politically active middle class. As Richard Hofstadter puts it:

Thoroughly middle class in his ideas, he spoke for those millions of Americans who had begun their lives as hired workers-as farm hands, clerks, teachers, mechanics, flatboat men, and rail- splitters-and had passed into the ranks of landed farmers, prosperous grocers, lawyers, merchants, physicians and politicians.

Lincoln could argue with lucidity and passion against slavery on moral grounds, while acting cautiously in practical politics. He believed "that the institution of slavery is founded on injustice and bad policy, but that the promulgation of abolition doctrines tends to increase rather than abate its evils." (Put against this Frederick Douglass's statement on struggle, or Garrison's "Sir, slavery will not be overthrown without excitement, a most tremendous excitement") Lincoln read the Constitution strictly, to mean that Congress, because of the Tenth Amendment (reserving to the states powers not specifically given to the national government), could not constitutionally bar slavery in the states.

When it was proposed to abolish slavery in the District of Columbia, which did not have the rights of a state that was directly under the jurisdiction of Congress, Lincoln said this would be Constitutional, but it should not be done unless the people in the District wanted it. Since most there were white, this killed the idea. As Hofstadter said of Lincoln's statement, it "breathes the fire of an uncompromising insistence on moderation."

Lincoln refused to denounce the Fugitive Slave Law publicly. He wrote to a friend: "I confess I hate to see the poor creatures hunted down . . . but I bite my lips and keep quiet." And when he did propose, in 1849, as a Congressman, a resolution to abolish slavery in the District of Columbia, he accompanied this with a section requiring local authorities to arrest and return fugitive slaves coming into Washington. (This led Wendell Phillips, the Boston abolitionist, to refer to him years later as "that slavehound from Illinois.") He opposed slavery, but could not see blacks as equals, so a constant theme in his approach was to free the slaves and to send them back to Africa.

In his 1858 campaign in Illinois for the Senate against Stephen Douglas, Lincoln spoke differently depending on the views of his listeners (and also perhaps depending on how close it was to the election). Speaking in northern Illinois in July (in Chicago), he 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, and therefore they must be placed in an inferior position. 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.

Two months later in Charleston, in southern Illinois, Lincoln told his audience:

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 (applause); 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 inasmuch as they cannot so live, 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.

Behind the secession of the South from the Union, after Lincoln was elected President in the fall of 1860 as candidate of the new Republican party, was a long series of policy clashes between South and North. The clash was not over slavery as a moral institution—most northerners did not care enough about slavery to make sacrifices for it, certainly not the sacrifice of war. It was not a clash of peoples (most northern whites were not economically favored, not politically powerful; most southern whites were poor farmers, not decisionmakers) but of elites. The northern elite wanted economic expansion—free land, free labor, a free market, a high protective tariff for manufacturers, a bank of the United States. The slave interests opposed all that; they saw Lincoln and the Republicans as making continuation of their pleasant and prosperous way of life impossible in the future.

So, when Lincoln was elected, seven southern states seceded from the Union. Lincoln initiated hostilities by trying to repossess the federal base at Fort Sumter, South Carolina, and four more states seceded. The Confederacy was formed; the Civil War was on.

Lincoln's first Inaugural Address, in March 1861, was conciliatory toward the South and the seceded states: "I have no purpose, directly or indirectly, to interfere with the institution of slavery in the States where it exists. I believe I have no lawful right to do so, and I have no inclination to do so." And with the war four months on, when General John C. Fremont in Missouri declared martial law and said slaves of owners resisting the United States were to be free, Lincoln countermanded this order. He was anxious to hold in the Union the slave states of Maryland, Kentucky, Missouri, and Delaware.

It was only as the war grew more bitter, the casualties mounted, desperation to win heightened, and the criticism of the abolitionists threatened to unravel the tattered coalition behind Lincoln that he began to act against slavery. Hofstadter puts it this way: "Like a delicate barometer, he recorded the trend of pressures, and as the Radical pressure increased he moved toward the left." Wendell Phillips said that if Lincoln was able to grow "it is because we have watered him."

Racism in the North was as entrenched as slavery in the South, and it would take the war to shake both. New York blacks could not vote unless they owned \$250 in property (a qualification not applied to whites). A proposal to abolish this, put on the ballot in 1860, was defeated two to one (although Lincoln carried New York by 50,000 votes). Frederick Douglass commented: "The black baby of Negro suffrage was thought too ugly to exhibit on so grand an occasion. The Negro was stowed away like some people put out of sight their deformed children when company comes."

Wendell Phillips, with all his criticism of Lincoln, recognized the possibilities in his election. Speaking at the Tremont Temple in Boston the day after the election, Phillips said:

If the telegraph speaks truth, for the first time in our history the slave has chosen a President of the United States. . . . Not an Abolitionist, hardly an antislavery man, Mr. Lincoln consents to represent an antislavery idea. A pawn on the political chessboard, his value is in his position; with fair effort, we may soon change him for knight, bishop or queen, and sweep the board. (Applause)

Conservatives in the Boston upper classes wanted reconciliation with the South. At one point they stormed an abolitionist meeting at that same Tremont Temple, shortly after Lincoln's election, and asked that concessions be made to the South "in the interests of commerce, manufactures, agriculture."

The spirit of Congress, even after the war began, was shown in a resolution it passed in the summer of 1861, with only a few dissenting votes: "... this war is not waged . . . for any

purpose of... overthrowing or interfering with the rights of established institutions of those states, but... to preserve the Union."

The abolitionists stepped up their campaign. Emancipation petitions poured into Congress in 1861 and 1862. In May of that year, Wendell Phillips said: "Abraham Lincoln may not wish it; he cannot prevent it; the nation may not will it, but the nation cannot prevent it. I do not care what men want or wish; the negro is the pebble in the cog-wheel, and the machine cannot go on until you get him out."

In July Congress passed a Confiscation Act, which enabled the freeing of slaves of those fighting the Union. But this was not enforced by the Union generals, and Lincoln ignored the nonenforcement. Garrison called Lincoln's policy "stumbling, halting, prevaricating, irresolute, weak, besotted," and Phillips said Lincoln was "a first-rate second-rate man."

An exchange of letters between Lincoln and Horace Greeley, editor of the *New York Tribune*, in August of 1862, gave Lincoln a chance to express his views. Greeley wrote:

Dear Sir. I do not intrude to tell you-for you must know already-that a great proportion of those who triumphed in your election ... are sorely disappointed and deeply pained by the policy you seem to be pursuing with regard to the slaves of rebels,... We require of you, as the first servant of the Republic, charged especially and preeminently with this duty, that you EXECUTE THE LAWS. ... We think you are strangely and disastrously remiss . . . with regard to the emancipating provisions of the new Confiscation Act....

We think you are unduly influenced by the councils ... of certain politicians hailing from the Border Slave States.

Greeley appealed to the practical need of winning the war. "We must have scouts, guides, spies, cooks, teamsters, diggers and choppers from the blacks of the South, whether we allow them to fight for us or not.... I entreat you to render a hearty and unequivocal obedience to the law of the land."

Lincoln had already shown his attitude by his failure to countermand an order of one of his commanders, General Henry Halleck, who forbade fugitive Negroes to enter his army's lines. Now he replied to Greeley:

Dear Sir: ... I have not meant to leave any one in doubt. . . . My paramount object in this struggle is to save the Union, and is not either to save or destroy Slavery. If I could save the Union without freeing any slave, I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing all the slaves, I would do it; and if I could do it by freeing some and leaving others alone, I would also do that. What I do about Slavery and the colored race, I do because it helps to save this Union; and what I forbear, I forbear because I do not believe it would help to save the Union. . . . I have here stated my purpose according to my view of official duty, and I intend no modification of my oft-expressed personal wish that all men, everywhere, could be free.
Yours. A. Lincoln.

So Lincoln distinguished between his "personal wish" and his "official duty."

When in September 1862, Lincoln issued his preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, it was a military move, giving the South four months to stop rebelling, threatening to emancipate their slaves if they continued to fight, promising to leave slavery untouched in states that came over to the North:

That on the 1st day of January, AD 1863, all persons held as slaves within any State or designated part of a State the people whereof shall then be in rebellion against the United States shall be then, thenceforward and forever free. . . .

Thus, when the Emancipation Proclamation was issued January 1, 1863, it declared slaves free in those areas still fighting against the Union (which it listed very carefully), and said nothing about slaves behind Union lines. As Hofstadter put it, the Emancipation Proclamation "had all the moral grandeur of a bill of lading." The *London Spectator* wrote concisely: "The principle is not that a human being cannot justly own another, but that he cannot own him unless he is loyal to the United States."

Limited as it was, the Emancipation Proclamation spurred antislavery forces. By the summer of 1864, 400,000 signatures asking legislation to end slavery had been gathered and sent to Congress, something unprecedented in the history of the country. That April, the Senate had adopted the Thirteenth Amendment, declaring an end to slavery, and in January 1865, the House of Representatives followed.

With the Proclamation, the Union army was open to blacks. And the more blacks entered the war, the more it appeared a war for their liberation. The more whites had to sacrifice, the more resentment there was, particularly among poor whites in the North, who were drafted by a law that allowed the rich to buy their way out of the draft for \$300. And so the draft riots of 1863 took place, uprisings of angry whites in northern cities, their targets not the rich, far away, but the blacks, near at hand. It was an orgy of death and violence. A black man in Detroit described what he saw: a mob, with kegs of beer on wagons, armed with clubs and bricks, marching through the city, attacking black men, women, children. He heard one man say: "If we are got to be killed up for Negroes then we will kill every one in this town."

The Civil War was one of the bloodiest in human history up to that time: 600,000 dead on both sides, in a population of 30 million—the equivalent, in the United States of 1978, with a population of 250 million, of 5 million dead. As the battles became more intense, as the bodies piled up, as war fatigue grew, the existence of blacks in the South, 4 million of them, became more and more a hindrance to the South, and more and more an opportunity for the North. Du Bois, in *Black Reconstruction*, pointed this out:

... these slaves had enormous power in their hands. Simply by stopping work, they could threaten the Confederacy with starvation. By walking into the Federal camps, they showed to doubting Northerners the easy possibility of using them thus, but by the same gesture, depriving their enemies of their use in just these fields....

It was this plain alternative that brought Lee's sudden surrender. Either the South must make terms with its slaves, free them, use them to fight the North, and thereafter no longer treat them as bondsmen; or they could surrender to the North with the assumption that the North after the war must help them to defend slavery, as it had before.

George Rawick, a sociologist and anthropologist, describes the development of blacks up to and into the Civil War:

The slaves went from being frightened human beings, thrown among strange men, including fellow slaves who were not their kinsmen and who did not speak their language or understand their customs and habits, to what W. E. B. DuBois once described as the general strike whereby hundreds of thousands of slaves deserted the plantations, destroying the South's ability to supply its army.

Black women played an important part in the war, especially toward the end. Sojourner Truth, the legendary ex-slave who had been active in the women's rights movement, became recruiter of black troops for the Union army, as did Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin of Boston. Harriet Tubman raided plantations, leading black and white troops, and in one expedition freed 750 slaves. Women moved with the colored regiments that grew as the Union army

marched through the South, helping their husbands, enduring terrible hardships on the long military treks, in which many children died. They suffered the fate of soldiers, as in April 1864, when Confederate troops at Fort Pillow, Kentucky, massacred Union soldiers who had surrendered-black and white, along with women and children in an adjoining camp.

It has been said that black acceptance of slavery is proved by the fact that during the Civil War, when there were opportunities for escape, most slaves stayed on the plantation. In fact, half a million ran away- about one in five, a high proportion when one considers that there was great difficulty in knowing where to go and how to live.

The owner of a large plantation in South Carolina and Georgia wrote in 1862: "This war has taught us the perfect impossibility of placing the least confidence in the negro. In too numerous instances those we esteemed the most have been the first to desert us." That same year, a lieutenant in the Confederate army and once mayor of Savannah, Georgia, wrote: "I deeply regret to learn that the Negroes still continue to desert to the enemy."

A minister in Mississippi wrote in the fall of 1862: "On my arrival was surprised to hear that our negroes stampeded to the Yankees last night or rather a portion of them.... I think every one, but with one or two exceptions will go to the Yankees. Eliza and her family are certain to go. She does not conceal her thoughts but plainly manifests her opinions by her conduct-insolent and insulting." And a woman's plantation journal of January 1865:

The people are all idle on the plantations, most of them seeking their own pleasure. Many servants have proven faithful, others false and rebellious against all authority and restraint. . . . Their condition is one of perfect anarchy and rebellion. They have placed themselves in perfect antagonism to their owners and to all government and control. . . . Nearly all the house servants have left their homes; and from most of the plantations they have gone in a body.

Also in 1865, a South Carolina planter wrote to the New York *Tribune* that

the conduct of the Negro in the late crisis of our affairs has convinced me that we were all laboring under a delusion.... I believed that these people were content, happy, and attached to their masters. But events and reflection have caused me to change these positions. . . . If they were content, happy and attached to their masters, why did they desert him in the moment of his need and flock to an enemy, whom they did not know; and thus left their perhaps really good masters whom they did know from infancy?

Genovese notes that the war produced no general rising of slaves, but: "In Lafayette County, Mississippi, slaves responded to the Emancipation Proclamation by driving off their overseers and dividing the land and implements among themselves." Aptheker reports a conspiracy of Negroes in Arkansas in 1861 to kill their enslavers. In Kentucky that year, houses and barns were burned by Negroes, and in the city of New Castle slaves paraded through the city "singing political songs, and shouting for Lincoln," according to newspaper accounts. After the Emancipation Proclamation, a Negro waiter in Richmond, Virginia, was arrested for leading "a servile plot," while in Yazoo City, Mississippi, slaves burned the courthouse and fourteen homes.

There were special moments: Robert Smalls (later a South Carolina Congressman) and other blacks took over a steamship, *The Planter*, and sailed it past the Confederate guns to deliver it to the Union navy.

Most slaves neither submitted nor rebelled. They continued to work, waiting to see what happened. When opportunity came, they left, often joining the Union army. Two hundred thousand blacks were in the army and navy, and 38,000 were killed. Historian James McPherson says: "Without their help, the North could not have won the war as soon as it did, and perhaps it could not have won at all."

What happened to blacks in the Union army and in the northern cities during the war gave some hint of how limited the emancipation would be, even with full victory over the Confederacy. Off- duty black soldiers were attacked in northern cities, as in Zanesville, Ohio, in February 1864, where cries were heard to "kill the nigger." Black soldiers were used for the heaviest and dirtiest work, digging trenches, hauling logs and camion, loading ammunition, digging wells for white regiments. White privates received \$13 a month; Negro privates received \$10 a month.

Late in the war, a black sergeant of the Third South Carolina Volunteers, William Walker, marched his company to his captain's tent and ordered them to stack arms and resign from the army as a protest against what he considered a breach of contract, because of unequal pay. He was court-martialed and shot for mutiny. Finally, in June 1864, Congress passed a law granting equal pay to Negro soldiers.

The Confederacy was desperate in the latter part of the war, and some of its leaders suggested the slaves, more and more an obstacle to their cause, be enlisted, used, and freed. After a number of military defeats, the Confederate secretary of war, Judah Benjamin, wrote in late 1864 to a newspaper editor in Charleston: ". . . It is well known that General Lee, who commands so largely the confidence of the people, is strongly in favor of our using the negroes for defense, and emancipating them, if necessary, for that purpose. . . ." One general, indignant, wrote: "If slaves will make good soldiers, our whole theory of slavery is wrong."

By early 1865, the pressure had mounted, and in March President Davis of the Confederacy signed a "Negro Soldier Law" authorizing the enlistment of slaves as soldiers, to be freed by consent of their owners and their state governments. But before it had any significant effect, the war was over.

Former slaves, interviewed by the Federal Writers' Project in the thirties, recalled the war's end. Susie Melton:

I was a young gal, about ten years old, and we done heard that Lincoln gonna turn the niggers free. Ol' missus say there wasn't nothin' to it. Then a Yankee soldier told someone in Williamsburg that Lincoln done signed the 'mancipation. Was wintertime and mighty cold that night, but everybody commenced getting ready to leave. Didn't care nothin' about missus - was going to the Union lines. And all that night the niggers danced and sang right out in the cold. Next morning at day break we all started out with blankets and clothes and pots and pans and chickens piled on our backs, 'cause missus said we couldn't take no horses or carts. And as the sun come up over the trees, the niggers started to singing: *Sun, you be here and I'll be gone*

Sun, you be here and I'll be gone

Sun, you be here and I'll be gone

Bye, bye, don't grieve after me

Won't give you my place, not for yours

Bye, bye, don't grieve after me

Cause you be here and I'll be gone.

Anna Woods:

We wasn't there in Texas long when the soldiers marched in to tell us that we were free. ... I remembers one woman. She jumped on a barrel and she shouted. She jumped off and she shouted. She jumped hack on again and shouted some more. She kept that up for a long time, just jumping on a barrel and back off again.

Annie Mae Weathers said:

I remember hearing my pa say that when somebody came and hollered, "You niggers is free at last," say he just dropped his hoc and said in a queer voice, "Thank God for that."

The Federal Writers' Project recorded an ex-slave named Fannie Berry:

Niggers shoutin' and clappin' hands and singin'! Chillun runnin' all over the place beatin' time and yellin'! Everybody happy. Sho' did some celebratin'. Run to the kitchen and shout in the window:

"Mammy, don't you cook no more.

You's free! You's free!"

Many Negroes understood that their status after the war, whatever their situation legally, would depend on whether they owned the land they worked on or would be forced to be semislaves for others. In 1863, a North Carolina Negro wrote that "if the strict law of right and justice is to be observed, the country around me is the entailed inheritance of the Americans of African descent, purchased by the invaluable labor of our ancestors, through a life of tears and groans, under the lash and yoke of tyranny."

Abandoned plantations, however, were leased to former planters, and to white men of the North. As one colored newspaper said: "The slaves were made serfs and chained to the soil. . . . Such was the boasted freedom acquired by the colored man at the hands of the Yankee."

Under congressional policy approved by Lincoln, the property confiscated during the war under the Confiscation Act of July 1862 would revert to the heirs of the Confederate owners. Dr. John Rock, a black physician in Boston, spoke at a meeting: "Why talk about compensating masters? Compensate them for what? What do you owe them? What does the slave owe them? What does society owe them? Compensate the master? . . . It is the slave who ought to be compensated. The property of the South is by right the property of the slave. . . ."

Some land was expropriated on grounds the taxes were delinquent, and sold at auction. But only a few blacks could afford to buy this. In the South Carolina Sea Islands, out of 16,000 acres up for sale in March of 1863, freedmen who pooled their money were able to buy 2,000 acres, the rest being bought by northern investors and speculators. A freedman on the Islands dictated a letter to a former teacher now in Philadelphia:

My Dear Young Missus: Do, my missus, tell Linkum dat we wants land - dis bery land dat is rich wid de sweat ob de face and de blood ob we back. . . . We could a bin buy all we want, but dey make de lots too big, and cut we out.

De word cum from Mass Linkum's self, dat we take out claims and hold on ter um, an' plant um, and he will see dat we get um, every man ten or twenty acre. We too glad. We stake out an' list, but fore de time for plant, dese commissioners sells to white folks all de best land. Where Linkum?

In early 1865, General William T. Sherman held a conference in Savannah, Georgia, with twenty Negro ministers and church officials, mostly former slaves, at which one of them expressed their need: "The way we can best take care of ourselves is to have land, and till it by our labor. . . ." Four days later Sherman issued "Special Field Order No. 15," designating the entire southern coastline 30 miles inland for exclusive Negro settlement. Freedmen could settle there, taking no more than 40 acres per family. By June 1865, forty thousand freedmen had moved onto new farms in this area. But President Andrew Johnson, in August of 1865,

restored this land to the Confederate owners, and the freedmen were forced off, some at bayonet point.

Ex-slave Thomas Hall told the Federal Writers' Project:

Lincoln got the praise for freeing us, but did he do it? He gave us freedom without giving us any chance to live to ourselves and we still had to depend on the southern white man for work, food, and clothing, and he held us out of necessity and want in a state of servitude but little better than slavery.

The American government had set out to fight the slave states in 1861, not to end slavery, but to retain the enormous national territory and market and resources. Yet, victory required a crusade, and the momentum of that crusade brought new forces into national politics: more blacks determined to make their freedom mean something; more whites—whether Freedman's Bureau officials, or teachers in the Sea Islands, or "carpetbaggers" with various mixtures of humanitarianism and personal ambition—concerned with racial equality. There was also the powerful interest of the Republican party in maintaining control over the national government, with the prospect of southern black votes to accomplish this. Northern businessmen, seeing Republican policies as beneficial to them, went along for a while.

The result was that brief period after the Civil War in which southern Negroes voted, elected blacks to state legislatures and to Congress, introduced free and racially mixed public education to the South. A legal framework was constructed. The Thirteenth Amendment outlawed slavery: "Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction." The Fourteenth Amendment repudiated the prewar Dred Scott decision by declaring that "all persons born or naturalized in the United States" were citizens. It also seemed to make a powerful statement for racial equality, severely limiting "states' rights":

Excerpted from [A People's history of the United States](#)

- [1](#). Libcom note: John Brown was an American abolitionist who attempted to lead a violent uprising against slavery.