CHAPTER THREE

WAR AIMS: UNION OR FREEDOM

Before reading. Once the shooting war began, President Abraham Lincoln insisted that the U.S. government was fighting to preserve the Union. He did not want to risk losing the support of four slave states fighting on the Union side: Delaware, Kentucky, Missouri, and Maryland. Consequently, Lincoln went to great lengths to assure loyal slaveholders in these states that the key northern war aim was “union,” and not “freedom” (the abolition of slavery).

But radicals in his own party, abolitionists, and almost everyone in the African-American community in the North wanted to turn the war for union into a crusade for freedom. The issue was not secession or union, they argued, but slavery or freedom.

The three documents that follow reflect the northern debate over war aims, presenting the positions of President Abraham Lincoln and two leading abolitionists, Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass, both of whom had escaped from slavery many years earlier.

Which war aim would you support: “union” or “freedom”? After reading the documents below, write a paragraph stating and explaining your stand.

When you have completed the chapter and discussed the controversy over war aims with classmates, reread what you wrote. Would you still take the same position?

“FREED NEGROES CELEBRATING PRESIDENT LINCOLN’S DEGREE OF EMANCIPATION.”
An engraving in the French pictorial weekly Le monde illustré presents a somewhat fanciful depiction of African-Americans’ response to the Emancipation Proclamation.

Abraham Lincoln: “My Paramount Aim is to Save the Union”

DOCUMENT ONE

My paramount aim 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 slaves, I would do it, and if I could save it by freeing all the slaves I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone I would also do that.


Harriet Tubman: Kill the Snake Before It Kills You

DOCUMENT TWO

God won’t let Master Lincoln beat the South until he does the right thing. Master Lincoln, he’s a great man, and I’m a poor Negro but this Negro can tell Master Lincoln how to save money and young men. He can do it by setting the Negroes free. Suppose there was an awful big snake down there on the floor. He bites you. Folks all scared, because you may die. You send for doctor to cut the bite; but the snake is rolled up there, and while doctor is doing it, he bites you again. The doctor cuts out that bite; but while he’s doing it, the snake springs up and bites you again, and so he keeps doing it, till you kill him. That’s what Master Lincoln ought to know.

— HARRIET TUBMAN, quoted in a letter by Lydia Maria Child, January 21, 1862
Frederick Douglass: “We Strike at the Effect and Leave the Cause Unharmed”

DOCUMENT THREE

...[T]here is but one effectual way to suppress and put down the desolating war which the slaveholders...are now waging...Fire must be met with water, darkness with light, and war for the destruction of liberty must be met with war for the destruction of slavery...[Fighting only to save the Union] we strike at the effect, and leave the cause unharmed. Fire will not burn it out of us—water cannot wash it out of us, that this war with the slaveholders can never be brought to a desirable termination until slavery, the guilty cause of all of our national troubles, has been totally and forever abolished.

--- Excerpts from three editorials by FREDERICK DOUGLASS in the Douglass Monthly, May, July, and August 1861

Examining the Documents

What determines President Lincoln’s stand on slavery? Harriet Tubman uses the image of a snake to make a point about how President Lincoln should wage the war. What is her point? Frederick Douglass criticizes the Union’s war policy by arguing that “we strike at the effect and leave the cause unharmed.” What does he mean? What is the cause and what is the effect?
The Debate Over War Aims

In the late winter and early spring of 1861, when eleven southern states seceded from the Union, they formed the Confederate States of America with a clear purpose: to defend slavery and preserve a way of life. The military goal of the Confederate Army was defensive, not offensive. There was no need for the South to invade or defeat the North. The task of its army, plain and simple, was to safeguard Confederate territory and uphold its “peculiar institution.”

The North, on the other hand, had a bigger job. To maintain the Union, its army had to invade the South, defeat the Confederate Army, overthrow the Confederate government, and force eleven southern states back into the Union. Its diplomats had to isolate the Confederacy from international support. And its navy had to stop ships from entering southern ports with military goods and food.

President Lincoln and his advisers believed that they could defeat the South without abolishing slavery. Convinced that the North’s victory would be quick and easy, they did not even bother to mobilize thousands of African Americans in the North who were ready and eager to fight for the liberation of their people. Lincoln hesitated to make such a move, fearing it might antagonize the four slaveholding states that remained loyal to the Union. For both political and military reasons, Lincoln made union rather than freedom his central war aim.

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What difference did it make whether the North’s war aim was union or freedom?

How did the aims of the North and South differ after the secession of the southern states?

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The March of the Seventh Regiment Down Broadway.

Newspaper artist Thomas Nast sketched the tumultuous send-off of New York’s National Guard regiment on April 19, 1861. Eight years later, Nast completed this oil painting of the scene.

Thomas Nast, The March of the Seventh Regiment Down Broadway, 1869, oil on canvas, 5 feet 6 inches x 8 feet. The Seventh Regiment Fund, Inc.

THE CIVIL WAR
But northern abolitionists and Radical Republicans—an influential congressional minority in Lincoln's own party—saw things differently. They scoffed at the idea that Lincoln could preserve the Union without destroying slavery. Slavery, they contended, was precisely the issue that divided the Union into two nations—one free, the other slave. Southern states had seceded to defend their "peculiar institution"; the North could only bring them back by totally demolishing slavery.

**Why did the Lincoln administration hesitate to mobilize African Americans to fight the Confederacy? What were the consequences of this hesitancy?**

According to this line of argument, the North needed to transform a war to preserve the Union into one for freedom.

When describing slavery and calling for its destruction, the rhetoric of Radical Republicans and abolitionists blazed with moral fire, using words such as "sinful," "evil," and "depraved." Eventually, the Radical Republicans won the day by combining their righteous passion with very practical arguments about the military benefits of freedom as a war aim. They emphasized that the slave gave the South a critical advantage: slaves did the work of feeding and clothing the Confederate Army, thus freeing white southerners for military duty. Consequently, if freedom became the North's war aim, the military advantage would shift from the Confederacy to the Union. Slaves would become a military asset for the North if they were granted freedom, since they would now have every incentive to sabotage southern production and/or run away to the Union side.

Lincoln and his generals eventually saw the military wisdom of the Radical Republicans' argument for freedom as a war aim. Two factors accounted for their shift: (1) slaves forced the issue, particularly in Virginia, by escaping in increasing numbers to northern lines; and (2) the North suffered staggering military defeats in the first two years of the war.

**Rhetoric**—the persuasive use of language

*War Aims: Union or Freedom*
The Contraband Policy:  
A First Step Toward 
Emancipation

In the spring of 1861, a Confederate commander in the Virginia Tidewater issued an order putting all male slaves in the region to work for his army. Slave labor erected the Confederate military batteries at Sewall’s Point, putting Union troops under General Benjamin Butler at a serious tactical disadvantage. But slaves building these batteries, seeing an opportunity for freedom, fled during the night of May 23, 1861, to Butler’s outpost at Fortress Monroe, Virginia.

Butler understood the importance of these slaves “as a means of offense in the enemy’s hands.” But his commander-in-chief, President Lincoln, was hesitant to free slaves because it might offend loyal slaveholders in pro-Union states. Butler, however, argued “that as a military question it would seem to be a measure of necessity to deprive [the Confederacy] of their [slaves’] services.” In fact, the escaped slaves also provided Butler with crucial information about Confederate positions and military

Why did General Benjamin Butler declare slaves “contrabands” of war?
What was the significance of his contraband policy?

"Contrabands" coming into the union lines. A sketch by Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper "special artist" Edwin Forbes shows a group of African Americans entering the Union camp at Hanover Town, Virginia.


THE CIVIL WAR
strength. Eventually, with Lincoln’s approval, Butler declared the escaped slaves “contrabands” of war—riches the slaveowners lost their rights to when the Confederacy rebelled.

A contraband slave was in effect an emancipated slave. The “contraband” policy was a first timid but important step toward full-scale emancipation. Lincoln maintained that this was not a policy of abolition but merely a tactic of war. Yet it opened the door, if ever so slightly, toward freedom.

_TIDEWATER_—the fertile low coastal lands of Virginia
_BATTERY_—an emplacement for artillery
_CONTRABAND_—seized property

A Northern Disaster at Bull Run Leads to the First Confiscation Act

Defeats on the battlefield also moved Lincoln’s government away from union and toward freedom as the North’s primary war aim. From the outset, the Confederacy had three clear military advantages: (i) they could draw on slave labor; (ii) they were fighting a defensive war on familiar territory; and (iii) they drew on the best generals trained at West Point, most of whom were southerners.

*What moved the Lincoln administration to change its war aim from union to freedom?*

_"CONTRABANDS" IN GUMBERLAND LANDING, VIRGINIA. A photograph taken in May 1862._

_James P. Gibson, May 14, 1862. United States Military History Institute._
The first major battle of the Civil War took place on July 21, 1861, at Bull Run in northern Virginia, as a Union force of 30,000 attacked a Confederate army of 22,000 men. Treating the approaching battle like a summer picnic, many northern civilians traveled from Washington, D.C., to Bull Run to see the battle. But Bull Run turned into a major defeat for the North, in which 600 died, and the picnicking northerners ended up running for their lives.

Horrified by the Union defeat, many Unionists began to realize, perhaps for the first time, that the war was going to be long and hard.

The Battle of Bull Run convinced many in Congress that it was time to try to deny the South its slave labor force— one of the Confederacy's most important advantages in the war. Passing the first of two confiscation acts in August 1861, Congress proclaimed that any slave owner whose slaves were used by the Confederate Army would lose all rights to those slaves.

**Confiscation**—seizure of property or wealth

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"THE STAMPEDE FROM BULL RUN — FROM A SKETCH BY OUR SPECIAL ARTIST."

Northern illustrated newspapers dispatched "special artists" to cover the war. These artists' sketches, engraved on wood blocks and published in *Harper's Weekly*, *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, and other weekly periodicals, were the North's major source of war pictures. A few short-lived southern illustrated papers appeared, but it was the *Illustrated London News* that most actively portrayed the Confederate point of view. Its "special artist" Frank Vizetelly sketched this rout of Union forces on July 21, 1861.


70 • THE CIVIL WAR
The Call for Freedom Grows Louder

By the summer of 1862, northern military opinion took a sharp turn against slavery. As contraband labor built fortifications and performed essential noncombat tasks for the Union Army, the attitudes of many white Yankee soldiers toward slavery changed. For one thing, as Union soldiers fighting in the South saw the horrors of slavery for themselves firsthand, many became convinced that the enslavement of African Americans was morally wrong. Moreover, slaves in the South actively supported Union soldiers, guiding them through unfamiliar territory and providing information on the location of Confederate positions.

But the main factor turning northern public opinion against slavery and toward freedom was a succession of defeats suffered by the Union Army. The quick and easy victories once predicted never materialized. Northern papers reported grim news of extended battles, exhausted armies, and immense casualties. Union forces did win a few hard-earned victories during 1862, including a naval battle that secured the key port of New Orleans and a bloody struggle at Shiloh, Tennessee, where Confederate troops retreated after both sides had sustained monstrous losses (4,000 dead, another 16,000 wounded).
But then, in summer 1862, the North suffered a series of alarming defeats in Virginia's Shenandoah Valley at the hands of Confederate troops under the command of General "Stonewall" Jackson.

Morale in the North sank to rock bottom that June and July when Union general George B. McClellan ordered his troops to retreat during a crucial battle near Richmond, Virginia. General McClellan, known for his timid approach to military strategy, had proslavery views. His retreat at Richmond paved the way for an invasion of the North by the Confederate Army in Virginia led by General Robert E. Lee.

Partly in response to developments on the battlefield, Congress in July 1862 passed a second Confiscation Act, this one more far-reaching than the first. It declared that slaves belonging to any slave owner who supported the Confederacy would be "forever free." The Congress also passed the Militia Act, allowing previously excluded African Americans into all branches of the military. These new laws encouraged even more slaves to escape, and by summer's end, the number of black men and women employed by the Union Army increased. First slowly, then dramatically, the balance of military power on the front lines changed between North and South.

*The Bright Side.* Harper's Weekly "special artist" Winslow Homer's 1865 painting, based on his wartime sketches, depicts black teamsters relaxing in a Union campsite. Unlike most images of African-American laborers, this unusual painting shows these men as distinct individuals (not as stereotypes). While the teamsters are shown resting, the supply wagons and mules in the background remind the viewer of the crucial role African Americans played in supplying ammunition and food to northern forces, and suggest that their relaxation is well earned.

Winslow Homer, *The Bright Side,* 1865, oil on canvas, 13 ¾ x 17 ¾ inches. The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. John D. Rockefeller 3rd (1973.7.38).
The Emancipation Proclamation

There was a natural progression from General Butler's "contraband" policy to the two confiscation acts passed by Congress and finally to the Emancipation Proclamation. Three factors prompted Lincoln to move toward a policy of emancipation. Two we have already examined: the role of African Americans and the gloomy military situation. A third was the need to isolate the Confederacy from its main source of international support, Great Britain.

The Confederacy saw Britain, the major buyer of southern cotton, as an important potential source of economic aid. The South found supporters among the British business classes, but working people throughout England had a long-standing hatred of slavery and the rich planters, and they would not fully back the Union until Lincoln took a strong stand against slavery. Britain's support of the Confederacy would not alone have persuaded Lincoln to act on the issue of emancipation. But in the summer of 1862, with northern armies faltering on the battlefield and African Americans pushing for liberation, Lincoln announced his intention to issue a proclamation granting freedom to some slaves.

On January 1, 1863, the Emancipation Proclamation took effect. It freed more than three and a half million slaves in Confederate areas still fighting against the North but excluded almost half a million slaves in the four slaveholding states loyal to the Union and tens of thousands more in Union-controlled portions of Tennessee, Louisiana, and Virginia. The proclamation justified the elimination of slavery on military rather than moral grounds.

Despite these limitations, the Emancipation Proclamation set off wild celebrations among white and black abolitionists in the North and rejoicing prayer among slaves in the South. There was even jubilation among the slaves in loyal slaveholding states who had not been freed by the proclamation.

African Americans, slave and free alike, understood that the aims of the war had been dramatically changed and that the Union was on a new course. Freedom was in the air.

An 1862 cartoon from the northern satirical weekly Vanity Fair depicts the Confederacy's president, Jefferson Davis, trying to gain diplomatic recognition from a skeptical Great Britain. "I hardly think it will wash, Mr. Davis," Britannia comments in the cartoon's caption. "We hear so much about your colors running."

Howard, Vanity Fair, July 10, 1862. American Social History Project.