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

Excerpting the Documents

• What determines President Lincoln's stand on slavery? • Harriet Tubman was 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."

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?

How did these differences influence each section’s military and diplomatic strategy?

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.

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.