Lying there, interrogated by the governor of Virginia, Brown said: "You had better—all you people at the South—prepare yourselves for a settlement of this question. . . . You may dispose of me very easily—I am nearly disposed of now, but this question is still to be settled,—this Negro question, I mean; the end of that is not yet."

Du Bois appraises Brown's action:

If his foray was the work of a handful of fanatics, led by a lunatic and repudiated by the slaves to a man, then the proper procedure would have been to ignore the incident, quietly punish the worst offenders and either pardon the misguided leader or send him to an asylum. . . . While insisting that the raid was too hopelessly and ridiculously small to accomplish anything . . . the state nevertheless spent $250,000 to punish the invaders, stationed from one to three thousand soldiers in the vicinity and threw the nation into turmoil.

In John Brown's last written statement, in prison, before he was hanged, he said: "I, John Brown, am quite certain that the crimes of this guilty land will never be purged away but with blood."

Ralph Waldo Emerson, not an activist himself, said of the execution of John Brown: "He will make the gallows holy as the cross."

Of the twenty-two men in John Brown's striking force, five were black. Two of these were killed on the spot, one escaped, and two were hanged by the authorities. Before his execution, John Copeland wrote to his parents:

Remember that if I must die I die in trying to liberate a few of my poor and oppressed people from my condition of servitude which God in His Holy Writ has hurled his most bitter denunciations against . . . .

I am not terrified by the gallows . . . .

I imagine that I hear you, and all of you, mother, father, sisters, and brothers, say—"No, there is not a cause for which we, with less sorrow, could see you die." Believe me when I tell you, that though shut up in prison and under sentence of death, I have spent more happy hours here, and . . . I would almost lie die now as at any time, for I feel that I am prepared to meet my Maker . . . .

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 ambitions 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 (vesting 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 but 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
SLAVERY WITHOUT SUBMISSION, EMANCIPATION WITHOUT FREEDOM 185

Truth rose to speak in 1853 in New York City at the Fourth National Woman's Rights Convention, it all came together. There was a hostile mob in the hall shouting, jeering, threatening. She said:

I know that it feels a kind of' hissing' and tickling' like to see a colored woman get up and tell you about things, and Woman's Rights. We have all been
thrown down so low that nobody thought we'd ever get up again; but... we
will come up again, and now I'm here... we'll have our rights; see if we
don't; and you can't stop us from them; see if you can. You may hiss as much
as you like, but it is coming... I am sitting among you to watch, and every
once and awhile I will come out and tell you what time of night it is.

After Nat Turner's violent uprising and Virginia's bloody repression, the security system inside the South became tighter. Perhaps only an
outsider could hope to launch a rebellion. It was such a person, a white
man of ferocious courage and determination, John Brown, whose wild
scheme it was to seize the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia, and
then set off a revolt of slaves through the South.

Harriet Tubman, 5 feet tall, some of her teeth missing, a veteran of
countless secret missions piloting blacks out of slavery, was involved with
John Brown and his plans. But sickness prevented her from joining
him. Frederick Douglass too had met with Brown. He argued against
the plan from the standpoint of its chances of success, but he admired
the ailing man of sixty, tall, gaunt, white-haired.

Douglass was right; the plan would not work. The local militia,
joined by a hundred marines under the command of Robert E. Lee,
surrounded the insurgents. Although his men were dead or captured, John
Brown refused to surrender: he barricaded himself in a small brick
building near the gate of the armory. The troops battered down a door;
a marine lieutenant moved in and struck Brown with his sword.
Wounded, sick, he was interrogated. W. E. B. Du Bois, in his book John
Brown, writes:

Picture the situation: An old and blood-bespattered man, half-dead from the
wounds inflicted but a few hours before; a man lying in the cold and dirt,
without sleep for fifty-five nerve-wracking hours, without food for nearly as
long, with the dead bodies of his two sons almost before his eyes, the piled
corpses of his seven slain comrades near and afar, a wife and a bereaved
family listening in vain, and a Lost Cause, the dream of a lifetime, lying dead in
his heart...
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.

(Appause)

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 bailing 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 never treat them as bondmen; 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. Du Bois 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: