

Interpreting Lincoln's life and work is extremely important. It's important to the past, it's important to the present, and it's important to the future. It's why I've come here tonight to lay before the House of Representatives my understanding of that interpretation.

Recently, there have been questions raised as to whether Lincoln should be credited with freeing the slaves. The argument goes, given some of Lincoln's history, his racial attitudes and statements, his moderate views on the subject, his noninterference with slavery where it already existed, his once proposed solution of colonization, his gradualist approach to ending the institution, his hesitancy with respect to issuing the Emancipation Proclamation, and using colored troops in the war, his late conversion to limited voting rights for blacks and more, why should Abraham Lincoln be credited with freeing the slaves?

Some have even argued that it was the various actions taken by the slaves, including the power given to the Union cause as a result of the moral case for overturning slavery, plus the actual military role of working and fighting in the Union campaigns that actually freed the slaves.

I've heard the arguments. I've read the arguments of our Nation's most profound historians who make this case. By forcing the Emancipation Proclamation issue on to the agenda, first of military officers, then of the Congress of the United States--which we all know then and now know to be reluctant--and finally of Lincoln, it was their actions, the actions of the slaves themselves that led to their freedom.

I think when looking at this argument--clearly just as the Congress and President Lyndon Johnson would not have been able to pass and sign the civil rights and social legislation of the 1960s apart from a modern civil and human rights movement--so, too, the military commanders, the Congress, and Lincoln would not have been able to achieve what they did without the agitation and the movement of the slaves and their allies. There is no doubt about that.

On the other hand, the slaves would not have become freed men apart from what these leaders did. Because historical interpretation has played up the role of white male leaders while playing down the role of mass movements and leaders of color and women, our understanding of history has been skewed. Some of the current put-down of traditional historical interpretation is legitimate rejection and reaction to this past, limited, and distorted understanding and interpretation of our history.

The search now, Mr. Speaker, it seems to me, should be for a more balanced interpretation, which includes striving to put many forces and multiple players in proper balance and perspective. That, I think, is what is at issue with regard to the question did Lincoln free the slaves.

To answer this question, James McPherson says in "Drawn with the Sword," that we must first ask what was the essential condition, the one thing without which it would not have happened? And the clear answer, the clear answer to the essential condition, the one thing without which it would not have happened, is the war.

Slavery had existed for nearly two-and-a-half centuries. It was more deeply entrenched in the South than ever. And every effort at self-emancipation--and there were plenty--had failed.

He said, “Without the civil war, there would have been no Confiscation Act, no Emancipation Proclamation, no 13th amendment to the Constitution, not to mention a 14th and a 15th amendment, and almost certainly no end of slavery for several more decades, at least.”

Fifteen Presidents before Abraham Lincoln had failed to sustain all of these forces to bring the politics of a peculiar institution to a moral head in our Nation.

As to the first question, what brought on the war, there are two interrelated answers.

What brought on the war was slavery.

What triggered the war was disunion over the issue of slavery. Disunion resulted because initially 7, and ultimately 11, Southern States saw Lincoln as an anti-slavery advocate and candidate, running in an anti-slavery party on an anti-slavery platform who would be an anti-slavery President. Rather than abide such a black President and black Republican party, Southern States, led by the Democratic Party, severed their ties to the Union.

Through secession, which Lincoln and the Union refused to accept, they went to war over preserving the Union. While Lincoln was willing to allow slavery to stand where it stood from 1854 when he reentered politics onward, Lincoln never wavered or compromised on one central issue, one central issue, the extension of slavery into the territories. And while gradual in his approach, Lincoln and the slave States of the South knew this would eventually mean the end of slavery.

It was Lincoln who brought out and sustained all of these factors. Thus, while Lincoln's primary emphasis throughout was on saving the Union, the result of saving the Union was emancipation for the slaves. If the Union had not been preserved, slavery would not have been ended and may have even been strengthened.

In fact, the first 13th amendment to the Constitution of the United States, the very first one, passed the Congress of the United States, and only the secession of States from the Union kept that 13th amendment from being added to the Constitution. It was the 13th amendment that would have allowed slavery to exist in all States and all territories.

Lincoln strategically understood that the Union was a common ground issue. It wasn't about black. It wasn't about white. It wasn't about slavery versus non-slavery. Lincoln said, Whatever your position is on the question of slavery, no State has the right to leave the Union. The Union became the rallying cry, the common ground issue around which he could rally the American people.

Some of us want the American people rallied around whatever we want them rallied around, but from the perspective of a President, particularly Abraham Lincoln, keeping the country together was central.

Today, we have agreements and disagreements with President Barack Obama, but President Barack Obama sees something that we don't see, unprecedented economic catastrophe. And he's driven by saving

our country for future generations, not by tax cuts versus spending or spending versus tax cuts, but a way to work our way out of the economic condition that we find ourselves in. And so the language that the President uses is about saving all of us.

Look at Lincoln in perspective. By holding the coalition together around the issue of the Union, enough Unionists eventually saw the connection between the two issues that he could ease into emancipation in the middle of the war when it gave the North a huge boost.

Even when Lincoln believed he was going to lose the presidency in August of 1864 he said, There have been men who proposed to me to return to slavery the black warriors who had fought for the Union. I should be damned in time and eternity for doing so. The world shall know that I will keep my faith to friends and enemies, come what will.

In effect, our 16th President was saying that he would rather be right than President, and as matters turned out, he was both right and President.

Clearly, Mr. Speaker, many slaves did self-emancipate themselves through the Underground Railroad before the war and throughout and even during the war, but even so, this is not the same as bringing an end to the peculiar institution of slavery, which only the Civil War and Lincoln's leadership did.

Therefore, Mr. Speaker, by pronouncing slavery a moral evil that must come to an end and then winning the Presidency of the United States in 1860, provoking the South to secede by refusing to compromise on the issue of slavery's expansion, or on Fort Sumter, by careful leadership and timing that kept a fragile Unionist coalition together in the first year of the war and committed it to emancipation in the second, and by refusing to compromise this policy once he had adopted it, and by prosecuting the war to unconditional victory as Commander in Chief of an Army of liberation, Abraham Lincoln freed the slaves. All of these factors came together in President Abraham Lincoln .

Now, did he sign the Emancipation Proclamation? Of course he did. Was it a political act? Of course, it may have been. In 1862, President Lincoln had Northern free States that were committed to staying in the Union where slavery was already illegal. He had border States all around the Nation's capital where slavery was legal, but these border States agreed, from their perspective, that while they felt they had the right to maintain slavery, they did not believe the South had the right to leave the Union.

And so Lincoln had to balance the politics of Members of Congress who were running in mid-term election saying, you know, I'm for keeping slavery alive in Maryland, but I also believe that our State needs to stay in the Union. Now, if I catch Mr. Lincoln saying something like this is about slavery, then I'm going to say we need to join the South because this is about our property.

Lincoln had to balance the politics of Members of Congress and balance the politics of Senators and balance the politics of Governors who were threatening to join the Confederacy but chose to stay in the Union because they agreed with Abraham Lincoln's position that the South did not have the right to secede.

Other States in the South, before he was even sworn in as President, had left the Union, and yet Abraham Lincoln from the outset pronounced slavery a moral evil that must come to an end. And then winning the Presidency in 1860, some of us believe that slavery was a moral end at that time, and it was a moral disgrace at that time, but it's one thing to advocate for it. It's another thing to advocate for the slavery being a moral inconsistency and immoral and wrong and run for President on that position.

He pronounced slavery a moral evil that must come to end, and he won the Presidency, and because he pronounced it and because he won, the South seceded. And by refusing to compromise on the issue of slavery's expansion into the western territory, which would have brought more pro-Confederate congressmen to the Congress and more Confederate pro-States rights Senators to the United States Senate, the President of the United States refused to compromise. No, not in the western States, you do not have the right to carry the institution into the Western States or on Fort Sumter.

And by careful leadership and timing that kept a fragile Unionist coalition together in the first year of the war, and committed it to emancipation in the second, by refusing to compromise this policy once he had adopted it and by prosecuting the war to an unconditional victory as Commander in Chief of an Army of liberation, Abraham Lincoln freed the slaves. Fifteen Presidents before him, Mr. Speaker, did not do that.