THE presidential campaign of 1860 was over, and the victor was stretching his legs and shaking off the cares of the world in his temporary office in the state capitol in Springfield, Illinois. Surrounded by the perks of power, at peace with the world, the president-elect was regaling old acquaintances with tall tales about his early days as a politician. One of the visitors inter-

he exclaimed angrily: "I will be damned if I don't feel almost sorry for being elected when the niggers is the first thing I have to attend to."

This story, shocking as it may sound to Lincoln admirers, was in character. For the president-elect had never shown any sincere sympathy for Blacks, and none of his cronies was surprised to hear him suggest that he shared the viewpoint of the reluctant and biased emancipator who freed Blacks with a stroke of the pen out of the goodness of his heart.

Since that time, the mythology of "the great emancipator" has become a part of the mental landscape of America. Generations of schoolchildren have memorized its cadences. Poets, politicians, and long-suffering Blacks have wept over its imagery and drama.

No other American story is so enduring.

"If Lincoln had had his way, Oprah Winfrey, Martin Luther King Jr., Jesse Jackson Sr., Lena Horne, Muhammad Ali, Hank Aaron, Maya Angelou, Malcolm X, Rosa Parks . . . and even Clarence Thomas would have been born in slavery . . . . If Lincoln had had his way, millions of 20th-century Whites would have been in Gone With The Wind instead of watching it."

rupted this monologue and remarked that it was a shame that "the great slavery matter" would be the first question of public policy the new president would have to deal with in Washington.

The president-elect's eyes twinkled and he said he was reminded of a story. According to eyewitness Henry Villard, President-elect Abraham Lincoln "told the story of the Kentucky Justice of the Peace whose first case was a criminal prosecution for the abuse of slaves. Unable to find any precedent, justice of the peace. As for the N-word, everybody knew that old Abe used it all the time, both in public and in private. (Since Lincoln supporters are in a state of constant denial, I have not used ellipsis in reporting his use of the offensive word n ——.)"

In one of the supreme ironies of history, the man who told this story was forced by circumstances to attend to what he called "the nigger question." And within five years he was enshrined in American mythology as "the great emancipator" who freed Blacks with a stroke of the pen out of the goodness of his heart.

No other American story is so comforting.

No other American story is so false. Abraham Lincoln was not "the great emancipator."

The testimony of sixteen thousand books and monographs to the contrary notwithstanding, Lincoln did not emancipate the slaves, greatly or otherwise. As for the Emancipation Proclamation, it was not a real emancipation proclamation at all, and did not liberate African-American slaves. John F. Hume,
the Missouri antislavery leader who heard Lincoln speak in Alton and who looked him in the eye in the White House, said the Proclamation "did not...whatever it may have otherwise accomplished at the time it was issued, liberate a single slave."

Sources favorable to Lincoln were even more emphatic. Lincoln crony Henry Clay Whitney said the Proclamation was a mirage and that Lincoln knew it was a mirage. Secretary of State William Henry Seward, the No. 2 man in the administration, said the Proclamation was an illusion in which "we show our sympathy with the slaves by emancipating the slaves where we cannot reach them and holding them in bondage where we can set them free."

The same points have been made with abundant documentation by 20th-century scholars like Richard Hofstadter, who said "it did not in fact free any slaves." Some of the biggest names in the Lincoln establishment have said the same thing. Roy P. Basler, the editor of the monumental Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln, said the Proclamation was "itself only a promise of freedom..." J. G. Randall, who has been called "the greatest Lincoln scholar of all time," said the Proclamation itself did not free a single slave. Horace White, the Chicago Tribune correspondent who covered Lincoln in Illinois and in Washington, said it is doubtful that the Proclamation "freed anybody anywhere."

There, then, the secret is out! The most famous act in American political history never happened.

Sandburg wrote tens of thousands of words about it.

Lindsay wrote a poem about it.

Copland wrote a musical portrait about it.

King had a dream about it.

But the awkward fact is that Abraham Lincoln didn't do it. To paraphrase what Robert McColley said about the abortive emancipating initiative of Thomas Jefferson, never did man achieve more fame for what he did not do and for what he never intended to do.

The best authority, Lincoln himself, told one of his top aides that he knew that the Proclamation in and of itself would not "make a single Negro free beyond our military reach," thereby proving two critical and conclusive points. The first is that Lincoln himself knew that his most famous act would not of itself free a single Negro. The second and most damaging point is that "the great emancipator" did not intend for it to free a single Negro, for he carefully, deliberately, studiously excluded all Negroes within "our military reach."

In what some critics call a hoax and others call a deliberate ploy not to free African-Americans but to keep them in slavery, Lincoln deliberately drafted the document so it wouldn't free a single Negro immediately.

What Lincoln did—and it was so clever that we ought to stop calling him honest Abe—was to "free" slaves in Confederate-held territory where he couldn't free them and to leave them in slavery in Union-held territory where he could have freed them.

Despite what everybody, or almost everybody says, January 1, 1863, was not African-American Emancipation Day. Nor, as Randall and others have said, was it a Day of Jubilee for the slaves, except in certain military venues and
LINCOLN Continued

Northern cities far removed from the hurt and humiliation of Slave Row. To tell the truth, there has never been a day in the United States of America when all the slaves could join hands and say together, “Free at last!” One of the many reasons why a national apology for slavery is imperative is that there has never been a day of closure for the slaves or the slaveholders—or the sons and daughters of the slaves and slaveholders. The real day of deliverance, December 18, 1865, the day and date nobody remembers, the day the Thirteenth Amendment was ratified, was so formal and was hedged about with so many levels of technicality, that it came and went like the oxygen of the air, giving life without giving notice.

It is in the precise sense scandalous that Americans, Black and White, are so totally misinformed on this subject. Professors, museum curators, media, prophets say almost without exception that slavery in America was ended by a presidential edict. And “other writers of what is claimed to be history, almost without number, speak of the President’s announcement as if it caused the bulwarks of slavery to fall down very much as the walls of Jericho are said to have done, at one blast, overwhelming the whole institution and setting every bond man free.” Nothing has changed in America since John Hume wrote those words in 1905. Despite computers, despite the Internet, despite the proliferation of books and pamphlets, almost all Blacks and Whites, including a not inconsiderable number of Ph.D.s, believe that slavery in America ceased on the day and hour that Abraham Lincoln signed a document that dissolved, like a mirage, the closer one comes to it.

The confusion on this issue is monumental as we are reminded every year when schoolchildren and scholars in Memphis, New Orleans, Louisville, St. Louis, Norfolk, Baltimore and other cities celebrate a January 1 emancipation that specifically excluded Memphis, New Orleans and Norfolk and didn’t even apply to the Border States of Kentucky, Missouri, Maryland, and Delaware. To add to the confusion, millions have created annual celebrations based on the idea that their ancestors were “freed” on January 1, 1863, but were not informed until months later by mean generals and officials.

If pressed, all or almost all scholars will concede that the Proclamation didn’t free the slaves on January 1, 1863, but this information is disseminated, if it is disseminated at all, in footnotes or asides, and there is a tendency, even among the best scholars, to defend or even praise the Proclamation that didn’t free anybody.

Will someone say that this was an accident or an oversight? But how can anyone fail to see that it required art, forethought and design to draft a document that freed everybody when in fact it freed nobody? And how explain the fact that the same accident happened twice? For when Lincoln warned rebels in September that he would sign an emancipation proclamation in one hundred days if they didn’t lay down their arms, he carefully and precisely said that he would free all slaves “within any State, or designated part of a State” in rebellion.

This language was not in the tentative proclamation that he read to his cabinet on July 22, 1862. That document said unambiguously that he intended to free “all persons held as slaves within any state or states” in rebellion. This means that he decided some time between July 22 and September 22 to play a little game. It means that he knew in September what he intended to do in January. It means that he was planning in September to keep in slavery the slaves he promised to free in January.

A growing body of evidence suggests that the Emancipation Proclamation was a ploy designed not to emancipate the slaves but to keep as many slaves as possible in slavery until Lincoln could mobilize support for his conservative plan to free Blacks gradually and to ship them out of the country.

This is no mere theory; there is indisputable evidence on this point in documents and in the testimony of reliable witnesses, including Abraham Lincoln himself. The most telling testimony comes not from 20th century critics but from cronies and confidants who visited the White House and heard the words from Lincoln’s mouth. There is, for instance, the testimony of Judge David Davis, the three hundred-plus-pound Lincoln crony who visited the White House in 1862, some two months after Lincoln signed the Preliminary Proclamation, and found him working feverishly to subvert his announced plan in favor of his real plan. What was Lincoln’s real plan? It was the only emancipation plan he ever had: gradual emancipation, the slower the better, with compensation to slaveowners and the deportation of the emancipated. His “whole soul,” Davis said, “is absorbed in my plan [my italics] of remunerative emancipation, and he thinks that if Congress don’t fail him, that the problem is solved . . . .”

What are we to understand by all this? We are to understand, among other things, that words, especially Lincoln’s words, are deceiving and that Lincoln announced his first plan as a
By the President of the United States of America

A Proclamation

Whereas, on the twenty-second day of September, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty-three, a proclamation was issued by the President of the United States, containing, among other things, the following, to wit:

"That on the first day of January, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty-three, all persons held as slaves within any State or designated part of a State the people thereof being in rebellion against the United States shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free; and the Executive Government of the United States, including the military and naval authority thereof, will recognize and maintain the freedom of such persons, and will do no act or act to repress such persons or any of them, in any efforts they may make for their actual freedom.

That the Executive will, on the first day of January aforesaid, aforesaid, observe as a day of national thanksgiving and dedication to the supreme being.

IN WITNESS WHEREOF, I do, by virtue of the power and authority vested in me by the Constitution and laws of the United States, do ordain and declare that aforesaid.

In testimony whereof, I have hereunto set my hand and caused the seal of the United States to be affixed.

Done at the city of Washington this twenty-second day of September, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty-three, and of the independence of the United States the eighty-seventh year.

[Signature]

Abraham Lincoln

President of the United States

Emancipation Proclamation, which is more often praised than read, did not in and of itself free a single slave.

LINCOLN Continued

mask to cover his real plan and his real end. That at any rate is the testimony of another intimate Lincoln friend, Henry Clay Whitney. What was his real end? The Proclamation, Whitney said, was "not the end designed by him, but only the means to the end, the end being the deportation of the slaves and the payment for them to their masters—at least to those who were loyal."

There is corroboration on this point from, of all people, Abraham Lincoln, who asked Congress in his second State of the Union Message to approve not the Emancipation Proclamation but an entirely different plan, the real plan he had confided to Judge Davis, a plan that contradicted the Proclamation and called for, among other things, the deportation—his word—of Blacks and the racial cleansing of the United States of America.

Lincoln was playing with the lives of more than a half-million slaves, including some one hundred thousand Blacks in New Orleans and other Union-held areas in Louisiana. Many of these slaves had been freed for all practical purposes when Union forces captured New Orleans and surrounding areas in April 1862. Most, if not all of them, had been freed again, this time legally, by the Second Confiscation Act. But since Lincoln had never enforced that act, the Louisiana slaves existed in a kind of no-man's land between Union generals, treasury agents, and the old slaveowners. On January 1, 1863, Abraham Lincoln, commander in chief of the United States Army and Navy, could have freed these slaves again, perhaps forever, with a stroke of the pen. But instead of using his pen to free them, he used it to reenslave tens of thousands of men, women and children, remanding them to the slavemasters and the antebellum status quo.

Five cabinet members and other officials, including at least one Southern governor, told Abraham Lincoln that this was inefficient, unfair and perhaps illegal, but he insisted on condemning these slaves to additional months and years of unnecessary slavery. We are thus left with a strange paradox, a paradox overlooked by all or almost all interpreters, that the Emancipation Proclamation enslaved and/or continued the enslavement of some 500,000 slaves, more slaves than it ever freed. That's an important point. Let's rephrase it and put it another way: On January 1, 1863, Abraham Lincoln reenslaved and/or condemned to extended slavery more Blacks than he ever freed.

Did this cause him anguish and pain? If so, he gave no indications, arguing heatedly and passionately for continued slavery in the exempted areas, giving different reasons at different times, citing on one occasion the Constitution and on another the need to strengthen Southern White loyalists.

Lincoln knew what he was doing. Not only that, he told everybody what he was doing, and everybody, or almost everybody, has refused to read and understand the words he wrote to describe what he was doing. In both the Preliminary Proclamation, and in a quotation in the final Proclamation, Lincoln said in the same sentence that the slaves in designated areas would be free and that the government would do nothing to repress them "in any efforts they may make for their actual freedom."

Actual: this is the word that gives the game away. Lincoln said he was giving the slaves freedom, and that the government would not repress them if they decided to run away and actually free themselves. Of such nuances of language are Memorials on the Mall made.

This language provides irrefutable proof that Abraham Lincoln never intended to provide for the actual freedom of the slaves, and it is embarrassing to have to say what almost everybody overlooks, and is that the most famous document on slavery in history does not deal with slavery at all, does not in fact use the word slavery at all, pretending, in language any first-year law student could have ripped to shreds, to free certain vaguely defined slaves.

If African-Americans had relied on that document alone, they would still be in slavery in several states and areas. The Proclamation didn't apply to the Border States and Tennessee, and it expected, as we have seen, certain slaves, a lot of slaves, in other states. If we were relying on the Emancipation Proclamation today, then, Blacks would still be in slavery in Delaware, Kentucky, Maryland, Missouri, Tennessee, part of Virginia and part of Louisiana.

What about the slaves in other areas? Would they be free? Probably not, for the Proclamation, as Lincoln pointed out to anybody who would listen, was a war document of limited legality and scope, and its writ would probably have ended, as Lincoln said, with the end of the war. Worse, there were so many legal loopholes in the document itself that, standing alone, it would have triggered at least a century of litigation.

If further evidence is required to show that Lincoln and the Emancipation Proclamation didn't free Blacks, and that Lincoln knew it didn't free Blacks, it can be found in the numbers.

On January 1, 1863, there were some four million slaves in America. A contemporary source, Appletons' Annual Cyclopaedia, said in 1863 that the Proclamation "did not
appear to make free any slave by its own operation during the year.

On January 2, 1863, therefore, and January 2, 1864, and on the day after that and the day after that, there were approximately four million slaves in America.

On this point, we can call Lincoln and his secretary of state to witness against the mythmakers. Two months before the end of the war, on February 3, 1865, Lincoln and Seward said that “only about two hundred thousand slaves had come under the actual operation of the Proclamation, and who were then in the enjoyment of their freedom under it” (italics added). What they meant of course was that some two hundred thousand slaves had freed themselves or had been freed by the Union Army, which meant, among other things, that almost all of the two hundred thousand, assuming the truth of the figures, would have been freed under the confiscation acts, and that most of them would have been freed sooner if Lincoln had enforced those acts.

Whatever the accuracy of these figures, the fact that Lincoln said the first that 95 percent of the slaves—at least 3,500,000 by their figures—were still in slavery in February 1865, two months before the end of the war, destroys the foundation of the great emancipator myth and proves the thesis of this chapter.

There is finally and conclusively the testimony of Abraham Lincoln. What did he think he was doing when he signed the Emancipation Proclamation? He thought, he can judge by what he said two months before his death, that he was only freeing slaves who freed themselves by escaping or by “coming under the operation of the Proclamation.” He didn’t even believe, according to the proof of his own words, that he was freeing the overwhelming majority in the slave states. It was his personal belief, he said, that the courts would hold that if the Emancipation Proclamation was a war decree that would be “inoperative” after the war ended and that the status of the overwhelming majority of slaves would be up to the courts to decide.

Who freed these slaves?

To the extent that they were ever “freed,” they were freed by the Thirteenth Amendment, which was authored and pressured into existence by Lincoln but by the great emancipators nobody knows, the abolitionists and congressional leaders who created the climate and generated the pressure that goaded, prodded, drove, forced Lincoln into glory by associating him with a policy that he adamantly opposed for at least fifty-four of the fifty-six years of his life. The best witness once again is Abraham Lincoln who said shortly before his death that “he never would have done it, if he had not been compelled by necessity to do it, to maintain the union.”

Every Lincoln scholar knows this. Yet most scholars continue to say that Lincoln freed the slaves, violating history and the plain language of the document which everybody praises and nobody reads.

Lincoln didn’t free the slaves. If it had been left up to him, Blacks would have remained in slavery to 1900 or even longer. In a September 1858 speech, he said, “I do not suppose that in the most peaceful way ultimate extinction of slavery would occur in less than a hundred years at the least,” which would have pushed emancipation to September 1858 “at least,” twenty-nine years after the birth of Martin Luther King Jr. and four years after Brown v. Board of Education. If Lincoln had had his way, Oprah Winfrey, Martin Luther King Jr., Jesse Jackson, Lena Horne, Booker T. Washington, Thurgood Marshall, Duke Ellington, Muhammad Ali, Jesse Owens, Louis Armstrong, W. C. Handy, Hank Aaron, Maya Angelou, Debbie Allen, Benjamin Quarles, Josephine Baker, Mary McLeod Bethune, Ralph Bunche, Malcolm X, Rosa Parks, Leontyne Price, Bessie Smith, Walter White, Madame C. J. Walker, Maxine Waters, Gwendolyn Brooks, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Richard Wright, Alex Haley, and even Clarence Thomas would have been born in slavery.

“H1f had had my way,” Lincoln told a petitioner in October 1862, “this war would never have been commenced; if I had been allowed my way this war would have ended before this . . .”

Before what? Before the blunders of the Lincoln administration and the intrusiveness of Confederates forced him to stretch out his hand to Ethiopia.

Lincoln didn’t change.

If he had had his way, millions of 20th-century Whites would have been in Gone With The Wind instead of watching it.

Must we say then that the Proclamation was nothing? By no means. This would be to make the same mistake as people who say it was everything. In fact, as we shall see, it was one link and only one link, in the chain of emancipation.

Lincoln was at best an incidental factor in that process, for he did everything he could to avoid the end that immortalized him. Even if it turns out that the Proclamation advanced the process, he didn’t plan it that way. What he planned, in fact, was the precise opposite of what happened. And if he had been told “when he entered on the Presidency,” Hume said, “that before his term of office would expire, he would be hailed as ‘The Great Emancipator,’ he would have treated the statement as equal to one of his own best jokes” (143).

The task before us, then, is to explain how the joke became history and history myth and nightmare.

And in dealing with that task, one must remember always that the unknown and underrated slaves played a major role in liberating themselves. In fact, as Victor B. Howard and others have said, the slaves made a larger contribution to this process than Lincoln. One sees this clearest perhaps in Kentucky where Lincoln condemned slaves to continued slavery and where the slaves reduced his proslavery Border State policy to shambles, Howard said, by refusing “to play the part of slaves any longer.” If “the Blacks themselves had not taken the initiative to abandon slavery,” he said, “there would have been no emancipation in 1863 . . .”

Or 1864, or 1865.

What saved these slaves and the Union was neither Lincoln nor the Proclamation but the Thirteenth Amendment, the Union Army, including the 200,000 Black soldiers, and three empowering and liberating provisions of the emancipating Thirty-seventh Congress: 1) a revision of the military code forbidding soldiers to return slaves to slaveowners; 2) the Confiscation Act which freed the slaves of all rebels de jure and freed all slaves de facto who escaped or came into contact with the Union Army; and 3) an act that freed all slaves and their families who enlisted in the Union Army. In 1864 alone, twenty-five thousand Kentucky slaves freed themselves and their families by enlisting—twenty-five thousand more than were ever freed in Kentucky by Lincoln. By the end of that year, Howard said, the Army and the slaves were well on the way to making emancipation a reality in Kentucky and other states—despite Abraham Lincoln, not because of him. This means, among other things, that the slaves were among the greatest of all emancipators and that they helped emancipate themselves and almost emancipated Lincoln.