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The Thirteenth Amendment and Pan-American Emancipation

Don H. Doyle

University of South Carolina
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0007-2711-8104
Email: DOYLEDH@mailbox.sc.edu

Abstract

The year 2025 marks the 160th anniversary of the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment to the US Constitution, which finalized the total and immediate emancipation of the entire enslaved population of the newly reunited nation. The motivation behind the Lincoln administration's emancipation policy was a combination of practical advantages and humanitarian idealism. The Emancipation Proclamation, issued in September 1862 and enacted in January 1863, played a crucial role in the Union's effort to thwart European intervention on behalf of the Confederacy. The response of European liberals, notably Giuseppe Garibaldi, signaled a shift of popular sympathy abroad for the Union cause. Emancipation also entailed provisions for enlisting free and enslaved African Americans in the Union armed forces. They contributed about ten percent of the army, a vital addition that came at a crucial time in the war. Their service also helped lay the groundwork for claims to full citizenship after the war. The idea of a Constitutional amendment to definitively end slavery in the nation emerged after Lincoln's landslide reelection in 1864, which Republicans viewed as a popular mandate for emancipation. The Thirteenth Amendment was the first of three Reconstruction-era amendments designed to enfranchise formerly enslaved people as full and equal citizens of the nation. Its rapid passage through Congress in January 1865 and its ratification by the states in December of that year were energized by a new commitment to the radical reconstruction of the South. By this act, four million humans were set free, the largest emancipation of its kind in history. It also

signaled the end of slavery in its remaining bastions, the Spanish Caribbean and Brazil in particular, which held close to two million workers in slavery. The Union victory, Abraham Lincoln's martyrdom, and the example set by US emancipation energized abolitionists in Spanish America, Brazil, Spain, and Europe to bring slavery to an end. Furthermore, US foreign policy under William Seward became deliberately antislavery during the Civil War. His successor, Hamilton Fish, exerted pressure on Spain to put slavery on the road to extinction. The impact of events, people, and ideas coming out of the American Civil War had immense and lasting influence on the world, not least in bringing slavery to an end.

KEYWORDS

Emancipation, Thirteenth Amendment, Lyons-Seward Treaty, Spanish Abolition, Latin American Abolition

In December 2025, the United States will commemorate the 160th anniversary of the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment, which reads:

> Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction… Congress shall have power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation.

If the language was spare, the impact was enormous. This act preempted any legal challenge to the Emancipation Proclamation – issued by US President Abraham Lincoln on January 1, 1863 – by definitively abolishing slavery nation-wide. Though other countries in Latin America and Europe preceded the United States, none before or after came close to the scale of this emancipation. It was the largest emancipation of enslaved Africans anywhere before or since that time. Two-thirds of the entire enslaved population of the Americas at the time was liberated by the Thirteenth Amendment.

Before this, most Latin American and European countries had followed some form of gradual emancipation. Some passed free womb laws that granted freedom to children born to slave mothers, prolonging slavery for up to fifty or sixty years. Others, like Britain, supplanted slavery with

semi-free apprenticeships. British emancipation also entailed generous monetary compensation for slaveholders.[1]

Similar legislation for gradual emancipation was enacted in the Northern states of the United States; however, national abolition would represent a radical departure from these precedents. The Southern slaveholders' rebellion and the horrific trauma of the Civil War made such concessions to slavery no longer politically and morally acceptable. Therefore, emancipation in the United States would be massive, immediate, and uncompensated.

The Emancipation Proclamation

If the Civil War made abolition possible, it also made it necessary. Indeed, Lincoln first devised his plan for emancipation in the summer of 1862, issuing a presidential executive order justified by his constitutional role as Commander-in-Chief. Up until that time, Lincoln had publicly denied any intention of interfering with slavery in the states where it existed. As the war dragged on, the threat of foreign intervention grew. Britain and France, concerned about the prolonged disruption to the cotton trade and eager to see the United States dismembered, were moving toward a multilateral intervention scheme. Lincoln was worried the American public was not ready to pivot from a war to save the Union to one to emancipate the enslaved people. He realized that the European public was bewildered that the antislavery party was fighting to preserve a union with slaveholders without destroying slavery. Liberals abroad, not the aristocratic ruling classes, would support the Union if it made emancipation its unequivocal cause – if, in other words, it acted like the Great American Republic that so many held up as a model for Europe (Doyle, *Cause* 216-17).

Lincoln tried to persuade the slave states that did not join the rebellion (Kentucky, Delaware, Maryland, and Missouri) to legislate emancipation by promising federal inducements, but that effort failed. The military

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[1] For an overview of international emancipation see Drescher; on British emancipation and compensation, see "The Centre for the Study of the Legacies of British Slavery."

situation looked grim after General George McClellan's Peninsular Campaign to seize Richmond failed in the summer of 1862. "Things had gone from bad to worse," Lincoln told one confidant that summer, "until I felt that we had reached the end of our rope [… W]e had about played our last card, and must change our tactics, or lose the game! I now determined upon the adoption of the emancipation policy" (Carpenter 13-14).

Lincoln reckoned that the war-weary Northern public would finally be willing to accept abolition as the price of peace. His proclamation, drafted in September 1862, was an executive order, an edict not subject to congressional approval. Lincoln, as president, promised to abolish slavery in all those states and parts of states that remained in rebellion at the end of a hundred days. This way, he kept faith with his promise that he would do nothing to interfere with slavery but now made it contingent on the rebels to lay down their arms or suffer the consequences.

The preliminary Emancipation Proclamation of September 22, 1862, warned the South and promised the world:

> 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 whereof shall then be in rebellion against the United States, shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free.

Emancipation as Diplomacy

Lincoln understood the proclamation's diplomatic power. He immediately instructed Secretary of State William Seward to send copies of the preliminary proclamation to US diplomatic posts worldwide. At last, the Union would announce to the world that it fought for a higher moral purpose than to preserve the Union. It now fought for liberty and the rebels for the perpetuation of slavery.

Seward doubted that European governments would welcome the Emancipation Proclamation. At a stormy cabinet meeting in July 1862, he warned it would make the Union look desperate. Immediate emancipation would be seen as an invitation to a Haitian-style racial holocaust and would

throw the cotton economy into severe and lasting chaos. It might even hasten the impulse of European powers to intervene and end the war on humanitarian grounds.

Seward was right. The press, including a few liberal journals, predicted a massive "servile insurrection" and further descent into "barbaric" warfare without end. Britain's Prime Minister, Lord Palmerston, and Foreign Secretary, Earl Russell, conceived a scheme to offer mediation in the war, presenting it as a humanitarian mission to end a conflict neither side could win. Should the Union refuse, as they assumed, the European powers would be justified in siding with the South and recognizing the Confederacy as a sovereign nation. Seward made it emphatically clear that, henceforth, any move to aid the South or intervene in the war would be seen as an effort to rescue slavery from the sentence of death Lincoln had imposed (Doyle, *Cause* 216-22).

Seward expertly utilized the new moral leverage the proclamation gave him. He instructed his European envoys to ask: "Are the enlightened and humane nations Great Britain and France to throw their protection over the insurgents now?" "Will they interfere to strike down the arm that so reluctantly but so effectually is raised at last to break the fetters of the slave, and seek to rivet anew the chains which he has sundered?" "Is this to be the climax of the world's progress in the nineteenth century?" The questions answered themselves (qtd. in Doyle, *Cause* 243).[2]

The final version of the Emancipation Proclamation included language promising able-bodied enslaved males they could enlist in the Union Army and warning that slave uprisings in rebel territory would no longer be the duty of the federal government to repress. Confederate President Jefferson Davis answered by issuing a black decree that promised immediate death to any white officers commanding black troops and to any slaves in the

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[2] See also Mr. Seward to Mr. Adams. 26 Sep 1862. Department of State. Washington, n. 259. Office of the Historian. FRUS. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1862/d153>; Mr. Seward to Mr. Dayton. 20 Oct 1862. Department of State. Washington, n. 237. Office of the Historian. FRUS. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1862/d336>.

Union armed forces. Seward's prophecy of a race war seemed to be taking form.

During the hundred days between the September proclamation and the January 1 deadline, the mood in Europe grew warmer toward Lincoln's new war for freedom. Nowhere was this more poignantly demonstrated than in England. The workers of Manchester gathered in the Free-Trade Hall on New Year's Eve 1862 to declare solidarity with Lincoln and the Union cause, which had now become their own.

> You, as Commander-in-Chief of the Army, have appointed to-morrow, the first of January, 1863, as the day of unconditional freedom for the slaves of the rebel States. Heartily do we congratulate you and your country on this humane and righteous course. We assume that you cannot now stop short of a complete uprooting of slavery. ("Letter from the Working Men" 198-201)[3]

Historians usually give Britain center stage in any discussion of the international context of the American Civil War; however, let us not overlook the crucial role of Italians in shifting transatlantic public opinion in favor of Lincoln, the Union, and emancipation. In the summer of 1862, as the Great Powers of Europe were conspiring to intervene in the American Civil War, Giuseppe Garibaldi and his red-shirt army of followers mounted a march on Rome. Two years earlier, Garibaldi led *I Mille* (The Thousand), an army of volunteers, to topple the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies and bring Southern Italy into a unified Italian nation under the auspices of King Victor Emmanuel II (Riall).

Garibaldi wanted to continue the 1860 campaign to Rome, designated as the future capital of the unified Italian nation. That meant challenging Pope Pius IX, whose temporal kingdom was defended by a French garrison. Victor Emmanuel II ended Garibaldi's northward march outside of Naples. Two years later, Garibaldi aroused Italians to reignite the Roman question. *Roma o Morte!* Garibaldi's army of Red Shirts shouted. They landed in

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[3] Originally published in *Manchester Guardian*, 1 Jan 1863; for Lincoln's eloquent reply see "To the Working Men of Manchester" 63-65.

Marsala just as the 1860 campaign began and moved across Sicily, by ship to Calabria, and up the Italian peninsula toward Rome.

Fearing war with France, King Victor Emmanuel II sent the army to halt the march. At Aspromonte, a mountain in Calabria, shots were fired, and Garibaldi fell severely wounded in the ankle. He was taken to a prison near Spezia and remained in bed for weeks, recovering from his wounds. The international press was on fire with reports of Garibaldi, the gravity of his wound, his possible death, and rumors as to how the Italian government would punish him. Dozens of public demonstrations broke out in Europe, the most spectacular being the Hyde Park demonstrations in London. Public rallies in the park turned into violent melees between workers demonstrating solidarity with Garibaldi and Irish Catholics favoring Papal Rome (Riall 317-29; Fiorentino 211-20; "Garibaldian Riots;" Gilley).

From his hospital bed, Garibaldi issued a public letter "to the English Nation," calling on Britain to take the lead in the struggle for universal emancipation and human progress. He wrote that England had been the refuge of Europeans from autocracy and tyranny. He urged Britain to rebuke Napoleon III and his imperialist designs in Mexico. "Call the French nation to cooperate with you." Then, he turned to the American Question:

> Call the great American Republic. She is, after all, your daughter, risen from your bosom; and […] is struggling today for the abolition of slavery so generously proclaimed by you. Help her to escape from the terrible strife waged against her by the traders in human flesh. Help her, and then place her by your side at the great assembly of nations – that final work of the human intellect. ("Garibaldi to the English Nation")[4]

Garibaldi's march on Rome and his bedside appeals to European powers helped cause a ministerial crisis in the French government. To appease Catholics and his devout empress, Eugénie, Napoleon III replaced the foreign secretary, Édouard Thouvenel, who was perceived as being soft on France's defense of Papal Rome, with Édouard Drouyn de Lhuys, an

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[4] See also Doyle, *Cause*, esp. ch. 9.

ultramontane Catholic fully committed to defending the pope in Rome (Case and Spencer 330; 347-51).

The Garibaldi affair effectively upended France and Britain's immediate plans to intervene in the American conflict that autumn. News of the Emancipation Proclamation came to public consciousness in Europe just as the Garibaldi *imbroglio* came to a head. From then on, it would be difficult for any European power even to contemplate taking sides against the struggle to end slavery. That struggle was far from over, and the promise of emancipation hung in the balance for the next two and a half years.

Emancipation as Wartime Exigency

Lincoln was careful to justify the Emancipation Proclamation as a presidential wartime measure. He acted "in time of actual armed rebellion against the authority and government of the United States, and as a fit and necessary war measure for suppressing said rebellion." The language made clear that enslaved people, as of January 1, 1863, "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 acts to repress such persons, or any of them, in any efforts they may make for their actual freedom." The national government was going to protect their freedom.

The final version of the proclamation added language meant to calm fears of racial conflagration that had circulated in the press during the previous one hundred days. "I hereby enjoin upon the people so declared to be free to abstain from all violence, unless in necessary self-defence; and I recommend to them that, in all cases when allowed, they labor faithfully for reasonable wages."

However, the following clause invited freed people to serve in the Union military. "I further declare and make known, that such persons of suitable condition, will be received into the armed service of the United States to garrison forts, positions, stations, and other places, and to man vessels of all sorts in said service." Free blacks in the North were already

joining the Union military; now, they would be joined by those liberated by Lincoln's edict.

Once accepted as willing and capable soldiers, African Americans played a crucial role in the Union's victory. An estimated 179,000 served in the Army, about 10% of the total force. Another 19,000 served in the Union Navy, and thousands more black men and women served in non-combatant roles. As death tolls mounted and resistance to the draft stiffened, the Union military's "sable arm" played an incalculable role in filling the void and relieving pressure on the war-weary Northern public. Their service to the Union significantly strengthened public and congressional support for emancipation ("Black Soldiers;" Cornish).

Among white Union soldiers, most joined out of a sense of duty to their community and nation, but not to sacrifice themselves for the betterment of enslaved people in the South. Chandra Manning's meticulous investigation of ordinary soldiers concluded that Northerners began with an idealistic view of their purpose. They fought to preserve the Union and uphold the republican experiment in self-government as an example to the world. As the war progressed and these young Northern soldiers encountered slavery for the first time, many developed a humanitarian and religious sense of compassion toward the victims of slavery. Some wanted to punish the slaveholders. Others saw that emancipation would redeem the nation and remove a glaring contradiction to its republican ideals. One Irish immigrant wrote that the war set "the defenders of freedom, the champions of Liberty" against those "enemies of humanity, Liberty, and God, who would tare to attoms [...] the best Government that the world ever new" (Manning 151). For whatever reason, they understood that ending slavery would hasten the end of the war they were so weary of fighting.

From Wartime Expediency to Constitutional Amendment

It seemed clear that emancipation was helping win the war. It also opened deep divisions in Northern society over the purpose and cost of the war and the place of African Americans, free or enslaved, in the nation. In the 1864 presidential election, the Republicans made emancipation a central

focus of their campaign to reelect Abraham Lincoln. Democrats nominated General George McClellan, the failed leader of the Union Army whom Lincoln had relieved of command. McClellan and the Democrats called for a return to "the Union as it was," meaning the restoration of slavery.

Voters gave Lincoln a decisive victory. Union soldiers voted for Lincoln against their former commander by a margin of three to one. Lincoln also took the election as a mandate for emancipation. He insisted that the Republican Party included it as a goal in the 1864 party platform. Lincoln's stunning election victory provided the ideal opportunity to transform a wartime presidential order into a permanent part of the Constitution. Once the war was over, the president feared, recalcitrant Southerners would challenge the legitimacy of the proclamation in court or Congress (Foner 312-14; Vorenberg, esp. ch.7; McPherson 706; 841-42).

The usual path to enacting a constitutional amendment requires approval by two-thirds of both houses of Congress and three-quarters of the states. The first ten amendments, known as the *Bill of Rights*, were drafted as a bundle to garner support for the Constitution in 1789 and ratified two years later without difficulty. Only two additional amendments had been added before 1865, both involving comparatively minor, non-controversial matters. The Eleventh Amendment (1795) limited the scope of the federal courts. The Twelfth Amendment (1804) arranged for the President and Vice President to be elected together.

Seward agreed to lead the campaign for the Thirteenth Amendment through Congress. Steven Spielberg's movie version of the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment may exaggerate the sordid nature of vote-swapping and deal-making. "Laws are like sausages," German leader Otto von Bismarck allegedly said. "It's better not to see them being made." Lincoln played a forceful role in persuading individual members of Congress to support the amendment. "I leave it to you to determine how it shall be done," one congressman recorded Lincoln telling him, "but remember that I am President of the United States, clothed with immense power, and I expect you to procure those votes." There was immense pressure, arm-twisting, and the exchange of political favors. Still, the idea that this amendment was the product of bribery is a legend its enemies propagated to delegitimize it (Shapiro, "Quote… Misquote;" Shapiro, *The Yale Book*; Vorenberg 198-204; Stahr 338-47).

Congress had debated the idea of an amendment to end slavery since the enactment of the Emancipation Proclamation in January 1863. A year later, the Senate Judiciary Committee devised the language for a joint resolution. The Senate approved the resolution in April 1864 by a vote of 38 to 6. The vote in the House fell short that June. Pressure was mounting from all directions on Northern Democrats to support the amendment. Women played a crucial role in building public support. The Women's National Loyal League led a massive petition drive that garnered over half a million signatures in support of emancipation (Vorenberg; "The Civil War: The Senate Story").

On January 31, 1865, the amendment came before the House for a final vote. The galleries were packed with citizens, including many blacks and women, waiting in a charged atmosphere for the results. The final tally was 119 to 56 in favor, with 8 absent, exceeding the necessary two-thirds majority. The House erupted in joyous celebration (Voremberg 205-08).

The popularity of the Emancipation Proclamation led Northern states to compete to be the first to ratify it. Illinois urged the legislature to ratify before Seward had even sent official notification of its passage in Washington. Republican strongholds in New England and the Midwest were quick to join the rush to ratify. Democrats in New York and border states objected to the federal usurpation of authority over the states and the implications the amendment had for further political and civil rights for blacks. Ratification slowed as more conservative states balked. Lincoln's assassination left many doubting whether his successor, Andrew Johnson, was committed to the cause of emancipation, but Johnson proved to be reliable. Finally, in early December 1865, Georgia put the ratification drive over the top – Seward certified passage of the Thirteenth Amendment on December 18 (Vorenberg; Foner, *Fiery* 316-19).

Opponents of the amendment were correct about its implications for future measures to assure citizenship, voting rights, and civil rights for the freed people. Republicans in Congress were already busy drafting civil rights legislation and debating the right of freedmen to vote. The Thirteenth Amendment was sweeping in purpose and radical in effect. In one stroke, it abolished slavery immediately without any provision for gradual emancipation and no concession for compensating slaveholders. It put to rest the stubborn claim that the states had the sole right to

determine whether slavery was lawful. The amendment cast slavery out of the republic and made freedom the national standard. It also began a revolutionary program to transform the South and America. Two additional Reconstruction-era amendments followed, the Fourteenth Amendment granting birthright citizenship and equal protection under the law, and the Fifteenth Amendment denying states the right to restrict voting rights on the basis of race, color, or previous condition of servitude. The Civil War and Reconstruction opened the possibility of genuine revolutionary change in American society. It truly was the Second Founding (Foner, *Second Founding*).

Historians have focused more on the defeat of Reconstruction's revolutionary aspirations than on its undeniable and lasting impact on the nation and world. Slavery was thriving as an economic institution in America and the Western Hemisphere. Southern slaveholders put it all at risk to preserve slavery once Lincoln and the Republicans won control of the federal government in 1860. The Confederacy endured four years of horrific sacrifice to hold onto slavery, and they accepted its end with deep and abiding resentment.

The death of slavery in the United States also spelled the end of slavery in the Spanish Caribbean and Brazil, the two remaining strongholds of slavery in 1865. The Thirteenth Amendment definitively emancipated about four million enslaved people, which constituted more than two-thirds of all enslaved people in the Western Hemisphere. About 368,550 of these people resided in Cuba (1862), 41,746 in Puerto Rico (1862), and 1,510,806 in Brazil (1872) (Corwin 156; Bergad 120-21; 177).

The Civil War set off an international wave of turbulence in those colonies and empires still sanctioning slavery. Rumors of conspiracies and slave uprisings rippled throughout the Atlantic during the war. Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation clarified that the Union fully intended to make the war an excuse for emancipation. Officials in Brazil, Spain, and Spain's Caribbean empire watched with trepidation as events in the United States pointed toward the end of slavery there.

Robert Shufeldt, the US consul-general in Havana, reported to Washington soon after the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation was made public: "Among the negroes themselves I have no doubt the effect

of the war is well canvassed and I am told that they already mingle within their songs the significant refrain 'Avanza Lincoln, Avanza! Tu eres nuestra Esperanza!'" (Onward Lincoln, Onward! You are our Hope!) (Shufeldt to Seward 46; Graden, 199-202; 209).

Many Cuban whites hoped for Lincoln's success as well. Cuba, "the Ever-Faithful Isle," remained loyal to Spain when all the South American colonies fought for independence out of fear that rebellion against Spain would invite a slave rebellion against them. Cuba would go the way of Haiti and "become African." The US example emboldened many Cuban whites to protest the corruption and exploitation of their Spanish rulers. "The time in which Cuba and Puerto Rico trembled before the thought of becoming African is over" (qtd. in Martinez-Fernandez 46), a group of Cuban reformers wrote to Queen Isabella II in July 1865 (Corwin 142-43).

Cubans, free and enslaved, would flock to the harbor in Havana to learn news of the great war being waged to the North, knowing that its outcome would somehow change their future. When the ships brought news of Lincoln's death, Cubans responded with great emotion to the consternation of Spanish officials who forbade any references to Lincoln as the *Gran Emancipador* or say or print anything that might be subversive to slavery.

Lincoln's assassination brought an extraordinary wave of grief over the island. "Men and women wore, each man on the watch and each woman on the waist, black ribbons with the Union eagle and the portrait of the martyr," one Cuban recorded. Portraits of Lincoln could be seen on the walls of mansions and humble shacks; "the emancipator's effigy was a symbol, a flag, a means of expressing deeply felt aspirations in an oppressed colony and a land of slavery" (Santovenia 465).

The United States had already enacted a policy to end the Atlantic slave traffic that would effectively doom the future of slavery in the Spanish Caribbean. Early in 1862, William Seward reached out to Lord Lyons, Britain's ambassador to the United States, for a treaty committing the United States to cooperate with Britain in suppressing the slave trade. Much of the traffic was being carried out in ships registered in the United States because it alone refused to allow the search and seizure of enslaved Africans.

The Southern states had obstructed any effort by Congress to remove this embarrassing situation. Once they seceded from the Union, Seward moved deliberately to align the Union with Britain's antislavery stance before the world. If domestic policy on emancipation had yet to be settled, US foreign policy from this point forward was decisively antislavery.

The treaty had a rapid and devastating effect on the slave trade. The traffic between Africa and Cuba dropped sharply from an estimated 25,000 in 1860 to less than 7,000 by 1864 and down to only 143 in 1865. It was the death knell for slavery in Cuba, which continued to depend on the slave trade to replenish its heavily male population of enslaved labor (Milne 511-25; Drescher 328-29; Corwin 147; 181 and ff.; Marques 244-60; Murray 244).

Spain's Slow Path to Emancipation

Spain was the last European nation to sanction slavery in its colonies abroad, and international pressure to do something about it grew after 1865. There were feeble signs of antislavery sentiment in Spain during the 1850s. A Spanish translation of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* were published, and some dramatizations appeared on stage in the 1850s (Corwin 154-61; Schmidt-Nowara, *Empire;* Schmidt-Nowara, "From Aggression" 136).

However, there was no organized, public-facing antislavery movement until the Spanish Abolitionist Society suddenly appeared in 1865 as the American Civil War concluded. It was telling that the leadership of this organization came mainly from Puerto Rico and Cuba. Among the leadership were Julio Vizcarrondo and his American wife, Harriet Brewster, who came from Puerto Rico to Madrid in 1863 determined to arouse Spain's leading citizens to act against slavery. The society organized late in 1864 and held its inaugural public meeting the following April, just as the American war ended.

Another leading figure in Spain's nascent abolitionist movement was Rafael María de Labra, a Cuban-born immigrant who became known as the "Wilberforce of Spain." Labra was a great admirer of Lincoln and

America and he praised the Republicans for choosing to reconstruct rather than restore the war-torn nation (Arroyo Jiménez; Ferris; Corwin 177-79; Davies and Sánchez).

By silent agreement, the Spanish Cortes had not dared to broach the slavery question since 1838, nearly thirty years before. That changed on May 6, 1865. Antonio María Fabié, a historian and author, told his fellow deputies that "the war in the United States is finished, and being finished, slavery in the whole American continent can be taken as finished" (Corwin 162-63).

The government responded slowly. The following November, it set up the Colonial Reform Commission (Junta de Información de Ultramar), whose purpose was to address the need for reform involving governance and trade policies affecting Cuba and Puerto Rico and the future of slavery in light of mounting international opposition to the slave trade.

It took nearly a year before the Commission met in Madrid. It began by addressing such reforms as encouraging the natural reproduction of the slave population, coercing free blacks into the workforce, and recruiting Chinese coolies to work the sugar plantations. The delegates from Puerto Rico had finally had enough of this disingenuous reform talk. At the third session, they announced it was time for this "ill-fated institution" of slavery to end. The Cuban delegation was far more proslavery, and its members answered with a familiar litany of the horrors of emancipation: economic ruin and race war on the Haitian model.

The antislavery delegates, in response, warned the others on the Reform Commission that if Spain did not act to end slavery, the United States was planning to boycott imports from Cuba and Puerto Rico, with devastating consequences (Corwin 203).

The Colonial Reform Commission eventually recommended an immediate end to the slave trade, freedom for all children born to enslaved mothers, and compensation to the owners of 450 pesos per emancipated slave. The Commission further recommended several reforms for Cuba and Puerto Rico's colonial governance, including representation in the Cortes and equal civil rights for colonials and Spaniards. The Commission's report to the Spanish government was ignored.

In October 1866, a group of political and military leaders met secretly in Ostend, Belgium, to organize a revolution against Queen Isabella II and the Bourbon monarchy which had ruled Spain since 1700. They were fed up with the corruption and moral depravity surrounding the throne and disgusted with a series of imperialist misadventures in America during the American Civil War: the unsuccessful recolonization of Santo Domingo, the failed invasion of Mexico, and the humiliating efforts to reassert Spanish influence over its former colonies in South America.

The failure of the Colonial Reform Commission was the final straw for the Spanish revolutionaries. In September 1868, the coalition of Spain's revolutionaries seized control of the government, drove Queen Isabella II into exile in France, and proclaimed a liberal government based on universal male suffrage and a "democratic monarchy." It became known as the Glorious Revolution, a bow to the peaceful overthrow of England's King James in 1688. However, the democratic spirit of Spain's revolution owed more to the United States than to Britain. For Spanish liberals, America was the foremost model of human progress, liberal government, and, not least, emancipation. Juan Prim, Emilio Castelar, and other Spanish revolutionary leaders greatly admired Abraham Lincoln and his bold decision to end slavery (Ferris, *Imagining "America"*; Ferris, "A Model Republic" 51-79).

Cuba Libre

Within days of the revolution in Spain, simultaneous revolutions broke out in Cuba and Puerto Rico. Both proclaimed independence from Spain and, with less precision, promised freedom to enslaved people who joined the revolution. Manuel Cespedes, Cuba's rebel leader, later waffled, promising freedom only if the revolution succeeded. Most Cuban rebels, however, realized they had no hope of surmounting the well-armed Spanish forces without US aid, and no chance of that unless they issued an unequivocal proclamation of independence. They met in the small town of Guáimaro and drafted a constitution that established a genuine republican form of government and abolished slavery wholly and immediately. In a few

words, Article 24 struck down slavery: *Todos los habitantes de la Republica son enteramente libres* (Constitución de Guáimaro; Doyle, *Age)*.

The Guáimaro Assembly agreed to directly solicit support for the Cuban Republic from the incoming president, Ulysses S. Grant, and even invited annexation. The last act of the assembly was to adopt the banner under which Narciso López and his band of filibusters fought in the 1850s as the official flag of the Republic of Cuba. This was yet another bow to the United States and the idea of "making Cuba become part of the splendid American constellation," in the words of one advocate of annexation (Doyle, *Age* 163-65; Pirala 673; Zambrana 45; Guerra 81-82; May).

The Spanish government in Madrid was slow to move toward the abolition of slavery in its Caribbean empire. President Grant appointed Daniel Sickles, a Union veteran and Radical Republican, as the US minister to Spain. Secretary of State Hamilton Fish instructed Sickles to offer US mediation in the civil war that had erupted in Cuba, stipulating the abolition of slavery as one of the preconditions for peace. Juan Prim, representing the new Spanish government, agreed to grant Cuba independence only when the rebels laid down their arms. Cubans could then end slavery on their own accord. "That is your glory in America, the reward of your philanthropy, and we do not wish to deprive you of it." In truth, the liberal government in Spain faced stiff opposition to letting Cuba or its slaves go free (Doyle, *Age* 216-21).

Prim wanted to make the slavery question one for Cuba, Puerto Rico, and America to answer. Fish ramped up pressure on Spain, instructing Sickles to let Prim know that if Spain did not act to end slavery, the United States would take sides with the Cuban rebels. News of this threat was leaked in the press, and the US effort to mediate peace fell apart. American enthusiasm for the revolution in Cuba grew apace.

Finally, in May 1870, the Spanish Cortes debated a bill proposed by Segismundo Moret y Prendergast that would grant freedom to all children born to slave mothers, all enslaved over the age of sixty, and to all those who fought with Spain against the revolutionaries in Cuba and Puerto Rico. Emilio Castelar criticized Moret's timid gradualist approach and held up Lincoln and American emancipation as the model. "Pause a moment to consider the man who wiped out this terrible stain which blotted out the stars of the American banner," he implored the Cortes.

Moret reminded the Cortes that Lincoln would have preferred gradual emancipation because he wanted to avoid the horrible civil war America endured. Castelar admitted that Lincoln offered gradual emancipation, but the slaveholders refused "as they shut their eyes here and oppose every profound and radical change. And immediate abolition came." Lincoln, Castelar continued, "was convinced that all hope of compromise was gone, that gradual steps are impracticable in reforms demanded by justice and humanity." Castelar then rhapsodized about America's Reconstruction:

> The United States, having converted its slaves into men, have devoted themselves to turning those men into citizens. [...] And today, gentlemen, those beings who were formerly not even men, are freer than the first of the sons of Europe [...] Those men who were like beasts of burden, wretched as the reptiles that crawled among the cotton and the cane, are free men, are American citizens; they sit in the Congress and the Senate of Washington. (*Diario de Sesiones,* 20 Jun 1870 8989; Castelar 35)

Castelar's appeal for emancipation on the American model went unheeded, and the Moret bill became law on July 4, 1870 and was called *Ley de Cuatro de Julio*, a nod to America, whose impatient diplomats were not appeased. Fish disparaged the law, saying, "I can scarcely believe that it will command the support of the liberals of Spain, under whose auspices the revolution of 1868 was made. The total emancipation it contemplates is postponed far toward the middle of the next century." The law "may rather be called a project for relieving the slave owners from the necessity of supporting infants and aged slaves, who can only be a burden, and of prolonging the institution as to able-bodied slaves." This law must not be the end of the matter, only "the entering wedge for the eventual destruction of a pernicious system of labor" ("Presidential Message" 12-17).

Moret answered by reminding critics of America's slow progress toward emancipation and pointing out that Brazil still lagged behind Spain. Impatience with the Moret Law and steady international pressure from the United States and Britain, in particular, led Spain to enact immediate emancipation for Puerto Rico in 1873. Abolitionists, like Castelar, rejoiced. "We are brethren with the Americans in the cause of abolition

[…] We belong to the race of Christ, Washington, Spartacus, and Lincoln because we have fearlessly pronounced the word liberty and the definitive redemption of the slaves." The Cortes answered with "great and prolonged applause" and shouts of *¡Viva España!* (Corwin 284-87; *Diario de Sesiones,* 21 Dec 1872 2542-43).

Brazil Follows

Brazil watched Spain give way before the antislavery tide without taking any deliberate action to end slavery. The American Civil War and Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation had shaken confidence in slavery's future at the highest levels of Brazil's government.

Brazil, like Spain, did not have a robust antislavery movement or political faction in the government. Nonetheless, the American Civil War stirred individuals to raise their voices. Aureliano Candido Tavares Bastos, a young law student in São Paulo, was enthralled with America as a model for Brazil's future. Slavery, he was convinced, was a burden to human progress everywhere. Through his publications and political speeches, Tavares Bastos used the American Civil War to stir up serious debate on the future of slavery (Saba 82-84; 117-20; 124; 127; Bergad; Bethell 113-44; Conrad; Toplin).

The Union's ultimate victory and Lincoln's death moved several in Brazil's political leadership to speak out against slavery. In June 1865, Francisco Gê Acayaba de Montezuma, Viscount of Jequitinhonha, a senator from Bahia de Salvador, a stronghold of slavery, spoke before Brazil's senate. Brazil must honor Lincoln by removing "the cancer that weakens us," he told the Senate. When another senator protested, Jequitinhonha explained the "great cancer" he referred to meant "the institution of slavery" (Saba 116-17).

Louis Agassiz, a Harvard scientist visiting Brazil, reported a conversation with a prosperous slaveholder in Rio de Janeiro who bluntly told him that slavery had reached its end. "It finish with you; and when it finish with you, it finish here, it finish everywhere." Brazilians everywhere seemed to

grasp that the outcome of the US Civil War meant the end of slavery in their country (Agassiz and Cabot C. Agassiz 49; Bernstein 87-104; Saba).

Joaquim Nabuco, the leading voice of Brazilian antislavery, confirmed the indispensable role of Lincoln's example to Brazil. "Through what Lincoln did, owing to the great light he kindled for all the world with his Proclamation, we could win our cause without a drop of blood being shed," he wrote years later. "We all owe to Lincoln the immense debt of having fixed forever the free character of American civilization" (Nabuco 1; 4; Jardim de Oliveira 149-51).

In his annual speech from the throne in 1867, Brazil's Emperor Dom Pedro II called on the government to address the question of slavery. Still, it was not until Spain acted that Brazil's Senate finally confronted slavery's future. One year after the Moret Law passed, Brazil's senate debated a similar "free womb" law, known as the Rio Branco Law, named in honor of its sponsor, José Maria da Silva Paranhos, the Visconde do Rio Branco.

Senator Zacarias de Góis, from Bahia de Salvador, a stronghold of slavery, explained how international events had led to this reform. "Slavery had come to an end in the United States [...] the Spanish government is also ready to end it in Cuba. While the Great Republic [the United States] had slaves [...] the issue could be ignored." "We were shielded," another senator interjected.

Once the United States ended slavery, Zacarias continued, "We had no more excuses." "With Brazil alone as the only slave country in America, it was impossible to keep such an institution alive among us. [...] There was no need for a war against us to push us toward emancipation; the world laughing at us was enough; becoming the scorn of all nations [...] was enough" (*Annaes do Senado* 29-30; de Bivar Marquese 223-24).

Zacarias understood how emancipation in one country both inspired and compelled others to follow. Slavery was finished in Brazil because it was finished in the United States, Spain's Caribbean colonies, and everywhere else in the Americas. In the same way, the gradualist measures of Spain and Brazil gave way to total emancipation in Puerto Rico (1873), Cuba (1886), and Brazil (1888).

Conclusion

For nearly four centuries, African slavery had shaped the economy, society, and ideology of the Americas and the Atlantic World. Slave rebellions and antislavery societies, political reformers, and religious leaders had struggled to end slavery. Some predicted slavery would die of its own accord. Yet, enslaved labor remained a profitable source of enormous wealth – and lasting shame everywhere – until it finally came to an end in the American hemisphere.

The failures of Reconstruction's radical vision of building a biracial democratic society after the Civil War are well known. The destruction of slavery in the United States and across the Americas was, however, a noble and lasting achievement that no one can deny.

Slavery in the Americas had withstood countless rebellions, mountains of abolitionist sermons and tracts, and earnest efforts to reform. There were notable results in curbing the transatlantic traffic in slaves yet only limited success in ending slavery. During the wave of revolutions that swept the Americas and Europe after 1776, slavery was excoriated as a barbaric relic of the past, the antithesis of Enlightenment ideals of human freedom, natural rights, and equality (Israel; Davis, *Revolutions*; Davis, *The Problem*).

Several US states and several Latin American republics ended slavery by the 1820s. However, the overwhelming majority of the enslaved remained in the remaining strongholds of the plantation economies of the US South, the Spanish Caribbean, and Brazil. Abolitionists attacked slavery as a relic of the barbaric past, yet there was little sign of it giving way to the liberal ethos of free labor, natural rights, and the march of human progress.

Slavery as an idea was rapidly losing ground by the mid-nineteenth century. Still, as an economic and political force, the Slave Power in the United States (and its counterparts in Spain and Brazil) wielded enormous influence. In *Mastering America*, Robert Bonner argues that slaveholders exerted significant influence over key elements of the federal government throughout the antebellum period. In *A Vast Southern Empire*, Matthew Karp reveals that the Slave Power was in firm control of US foreign policy, through which they planned to build a powerful proslavery phalanx extending into Latin America. In the South, the price of slaves was rising,

and the enslaved population experienced steady natural growth, unlike any other in the Americas. Southern slaveholders also mounted a strong proslavery ideology and cast abolitionists as the enemies of peace and freedom. Slavery showed no signs of abating.

Indeed, slavery might have continued for generations had the South acceded to Lincoln's election and worked within the Union to mitigate abolitionism. Instead, Southern slaveholders chose to secede from the Union and form a nation that would perpetuate slavery forever. The war that ensued compelled Lincoln to turn slavery against the rebellion. The Emancipation Proclamation appealed to European public opinion, disrupted the enemy's workforce, and provided a fresh supply of soldiers eager to fight for their freedom. The collapse of the Slave Power in the United States was the death knell for slavery everywhere in the Americas.

Author's bionote

Don H. Doyle is McCausland Professor of History, Emeritus, at the University of South Carolina. Among his publications are *The Cause of All Nations: An International History of the American Civil War* (Hachette, 2015), *The Age of Reconstruction: How Lincoln's New Birth of Freedom Remade the World* (Princeton University Press, 2024). He is the editor of *American Civil Wars: The United States, Latin America, Europe, and the Crisis of the 1860s* (University of North Carolina Press, 2017). He taught at the University of South Carolina, Vanderbilt University, and the University of Michigan-Dearborn. He also served as a visiting professor in Rome, Genoa, Leeds, Rio de Janeiro, and Toulouse. Now retired, he lives near Charleston, South Carolina.

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