

A War Not for Abolition

By R. BLAKESLEE GILPIN

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One Saturday in late September 1861, Manhattan witnessed a scene that was becoming commonplace in countless New England towns and cities: well over 1,000 soldiers marched through the city, in the words of one observer, “Singing reverently and enthusiastically in praise of John Brown!” Abolitionism was hardly a universal idea, but the name on everyone’s lips was that of its most fiery, violent advocate. “No military hero of the present war,” the New York Independent noted, “has thus been honored.”

And yet, if saving the Union took precedence over ending slavery in the national narrative, why did “thousands of private citizens, young and old, on the sidewalks and in crowded doorways and windows” in New York join in the celebration of Brown’s noble death in “the cause of freedom”? In truth, these two meanings of the war had been competing from the very beginning.

When the New York Independent celebrated John Brown, a man many claimed was partly responsible for this unnecessary fratricide, it crystallized Northern fears about the purpose, course and possible duration of the war. The Independent’s melodramatic conclusion, all but declaring the war a fight for black emancipation, was particularly frightening to those who simply wanted a return to the antebellum status quo. “Few who witnessed the triumphal tread of that noble band of men arrayed for a war for freedom, will ever forget the thrilling tones of that song.”

These harmonizing soldiers and citizens challenge our narrative as a war for reunification that was transformed into a war for freedom by Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation. In truth, these two meanings of the war had been competing from the very beginning.

There were early indications that the war might encompass such aims, even if Lincoln and his administration maintained the opposite message for more than a year. Men like Benjamin Butler, most notably, tried to steer the military effort in a potentially abolitionist direction by making Fort Monroe in Virginia a haven for runaway slaves, while Maj. Gen. John C. Frémont proclaimed that slaves in Missouri were free.

Lincoln’s difficulties with slavery — he let Butler’s decision stand, while he removed Frémont — spoke to the enormous stakes of his decisions in the court of public opinion, both during the buildup to secession and in the wartime North. Was the war going to be fought for freedom or to preserve the Union?

The intervening 150 years have gradually obliterated how separate these concerns were at the war’s outset. It was only during Reconstruction that the cause of the war, slavery, was wedded so inextricably to the war’s eventual byproduct, emancipation. But six months after Fort Sumter, these

issues were so hotly contested that the Union effort seemed threatened not merely by the surprisingly capable Confederate forces, but by the battle over abolition and its place in the Union fight. How could the remaining states in the Union prevail if they were so divided over the issue of freeing the slaves?

Seemingly always there to stir up more trouble, Massachusetts Senator Charles Sumner leapt into the headlines with a speech at the Republican State Convention in Worcester on Oct. 1 called "Emancipation: Our Best Weapon." In trying to transform the war for Union into a "war of abolition," conservatives feared that Sumner would draw out the war and poison the Republicans as "a 'John Brown Party.'"

With Sumner in the crosshairs, and the echoes of "John Brown's Body" in mind, the New York Herald took on these rabble a few days later. "The War Not For Abolition" was the paper's bold headline for an article intended "to remove all misapprehension in regard to the policy of the general government in prosecuting the war against the rebellious States." The article cited resolutions in the House, statements by Lincoln and Lincoln's secretary of the interior, Caleb B. Smith, who explained the government's position before an audience in Rhode Island in August 1861:

My friends, we make no war upon Southern institutions. We recognize the right of South Carolina and Georgia to hold slaves if they desire them. But, my friends, we appeal to you to uphold the great banner of our glorious country, and to leave the people of that country to settle those domestic matters according to their own choice and the exigencies which the times may present.

A war for Union, in contrast, the war that Lincoln and his government were fighting, would preserve the bargains struck by "our forefathers." In the same issue, the Herald wrote of the administration under siege: "misapprehended and misrepresented by the extreme anti-slavery party at the North just as much as it is by the extreme pro-slavery fire-eaters at the South...Both one and the other persist in representing that the object of the government" is to destroy "the institution of slavery."

The Herald declared it "a seditious abolition conspiracy against the government." Led by the "Greeleys, Raymonds, Cheevers, Beechers, Garrisons, and Wendell Phillipses...in the columns of the Tribune, Times, Independent, Liberator and Anti-Slavery Standard," these "abolition fanatics" "pour forth a perpetual stream of tirade and abuse against the constitution and the President, and sow the seeds of insurrection." Abolitionists' relentless focus on John Brown and the war for freedom "tends to paralyze the energies of the federal government."

The Herald became even more incensed by late October. Abolitionists' continued efforts to transform the war into one against slavery did not merely "welcome the runaway slave," they also opened the government to the threats "of a foreign invader." The paper had a litany of outlandish critiques of Horace Greeley's Tribune and the New York Times: "the twin organs of abolitionism-the authors of peaceable secession-the authors of the Bull run massacre-the anarchists that would supersede Lincoln...the fermenters of mutiny in the army-the apostles of a war of emancipation-the secret opponents, hypocritical friends and constant embarrassors of the administration."

But the charges were more specific by the end of October. The Herald argued that abolitionists “endeavored to induce the North to secede...and were delighted when the South saved them any further trouble by seceding for itself.” The abolitionists, in other words, had caused the war. But when secession did not end slavery, “necessity invented for the abolitionists a better mode of accomplishing the object to which they have devoted their lives, and that mode was by using this war as a means of abolition, by making it a war of emancipation.”

True, William Lloyd Garrison had theatrically claimed that the Union was doomed from the beginning, and that the Constitution a “devil’s pact...dripping with blood,” it is hard to argue abolitionists, however fanatically, single-handedly begat secession. But the more general charge is certainly true: abolitionist speakers and editors were, from the beginning, trying to make the most of circumstance, and make the war about ending slavery — starting with Garrison and his paper, the *Liberator*.



In October the paper reprinted a piece by Charles Godfrey Leland that explained the abolitionist approach. Leland, a feverish Unionist, wrote frequently for the pro-Union magazine *Continental Monthly*, and eventually enlisted in 1863 and fought at Gettysburg. “This war is destined, sooner or later, to effectually abate this nuisance of slaveocracy by removing the cause,” Leland explained pragmatically, “Why not plunge in and settle it at once? Go at it bravely, and be done with it.”

William Lloyd Garrison

But Leland’s urge to settle the question of freedom bravely and immediately would never win over the shrunken and embattled Union. Lincoln and his underlings would continue to reject an emancipationist vision of the war, no matter what songs the Union troops sang or what realities materialized at the front. Even when Lincoln became converted, at least to emancipation as a military strategy, neither he nor his successors had the station or gumption to pursue a truly abolitionist course and destroy the slaveocracy.

That Southern power, as a white supremacist social system and national political force, was left intact, and its resurgence would be the source of the war’s most devastating legacies. At war’s end, the *New York Herald*, in its reactionary conservatism, proved to be most prescient. The Civil War was, and would always be, a “war not for abolition.”

Sources: *Freedom’s Champion* (Atchison, Kan.), Sept. 28, 1861; *The New York Herald*, Oct. 14, 1861; Charles Sumner, “*His Complete Works*”; *Boston Daily Advertiser*, Oct. 4, 1861; *The New York Herald*, Oct. 13, 1861; *The New York Herald*, Oct. 29, 1861; *The Liberator*, Oct. 18, 1861.



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