As we celebrate the 150th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation, Americans continue to fight about the causes and consequences of the Civil War.

Was the conflict “irrepressible,” some ask, or the result of the actions and inactions of a “blundering generation”? Did the North fight to eradicate slavery or to preserve the Union? Was Abraham Lincoln a Great – or a Reluctant – Emancipator?

In “Freedom National,” James Oakes, a professor of history at the City University of New York Graduate Center, addresses these questions in a monumental and masterful history of the struggle to end slavery.

“Cordon of freedom”
From the time their party was founded in the 1850s, Oakes points out, Republicans advanced the view that the Constitution recognized slaves only as “persons in service,” not as property; consequently freedom for every individual should be presupposed everywhere, unless states established the existence of “the peculiar institution” in law.

Certain that abolishing human bondage and saving the Union were inextricably linked, Oakes demonstrates, they used the exigencies of war and congressional majorities to construct a “cordon of freedom” that ultimately included a ban on slavery in the territories and the District of Columbia, an end to federal protection of slavery on the high seas, recruitment of slaves into the Union Army, the Emancipation Proclamation, and the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution.

Myth-busting account
Repetitious, at times, “Freedom National” also downplays substantive differences among Republicans and exaggerates public support in the North for some of their policies. Nonetheless, Oakes’ exquisitely detailed, myth-busting account of one of the most pivotal moments in our history is penetrating and persuasive.

Although his research only added to his admiration for Abraham Lincoln, Oakes shows that abolition did not depend “on the singular act of a single man” and rescues the Republican Party from the “inconspicuous place” to which it has been assigned in the story of slavery’s destruction.

Bold and bracing act
Most importantly, Oakes transforms our understanding of the Emancipation Proclamation.

It was, he reveals, a bold and bracing act in a process that already included two acts of Congress, emancipating slaves in Confederate states who voluntarily approached Union lines or who lived in areas occupied by the Union Army; offers of compensation to Border States that freed their slaves; repeal of the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850; and Attorney General Edward Bates’ declaration (repudiating the Dred Scott dictum) that free Blacks were citizens of the United States, who could not be deprived by any state of the privileges and immunities attaching to their citizenship.

Justified as an exercise of the president’s powers as commander-in-chief in wartime, the Emancipation, Oakes reminds us, was far more than an unenforceable liberation of slaves under the control of the Confederacy.

The proclamation lifted the ban on enticement of slaves to leave farms and plantations, intensified the pressure on Border States, and made the Thirteenth Amendment “politically viable.”

By the end of 1863, President Lincoln and General Grant had come to believe that Blacks troops (who were willing to serve despite unequal pay and insults and abuse by White officers and enlisted men) were shifting...
They were a double blessing, adding strength to the Union Army and depleting the productive capacity of the Confederacy (which in the closing weeks of war offered to emancipate slaves who joined the Army).

In 1865, about 100,000 Black men were in uniform at any one time, constituting about one fifth of the military’s fighting force. “Indispensable to northern victory,” Oakes writes, they were “indispensable to slavery’s destruction.”

Dr. Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University. He occasionally writes reviews for the Florida Courier.

Related stories

- Commentary: The Emancipation of Abe Lincoln
- The fight for freedom
- Jada Pinkett Smith to launch campaign to raise awareness…
- Novel about president overflowing with robbery, murder and…
- Juneteenth was worth remembering

Share this story

0 1 0

Twee Like

About admin

View all posts by admin →

You must be logged in to post a comment Login

Meta

Register
Log in
Entries RSS
Comments RSS
WordPress.org

Flcourier.com archives

January 2013
December 2012
November 2012
October 2012
September 2012
August 2012
July 2012
June 2012
May 2012
April 2012

Socialize with us!

About the Florida Courier

Sharing Black Life, Statewide (click here)