



Lincoln prepares for Reconstruction - President made plans to reunite nation

BY RANDY KOCH

While the Union failed to achieve significant military victories in 1862, and even endured some devastating defeats, it did succeed in occupying vast tracts of rebel territory. Southern Louisiana, areas of the Carolinas, western Virginia and much of Tennessee fell under federal control.

President Lincoln moved cautiously on the slavery issue, not wishing to alienate Kentucky, Maryland, Missouri, or loyalists living in Southern states. Extremely astute at reading the pulse of the citizenry, he realized moving too far beyond public opinion could wrest political power from him and his congressional base. However, by the middle of 1862, Lincoln and others realized saving the Union might require drastically transforming it. The president moved forward intent upon setting the policy himself rather than allowing congress to snatch it.

When Lincoln announced his intentions to his cabinet on July 22, 1862 to issue the Emancipation edict, Secretary of State Seward wisely suggested the president wait for a Northern battlefield victory to squash the perception of the edict being an act of desperation. Following the bloody stalemate at Antietam in September, the president used Gen. Robert E. Lee's retreat from northern soil as a springboard. Effective Jan. 1, 1863, slaves in all territories still in rebellion against the United States would be free.

The decree did nothing to improve the status of slaves in the loyal Border States or former Confederate lands now under Union control. It did boldly strike the first blow to set the stage for total emancipation. It would also complicate reconstruction when and if it came. The proclamation allowed African Americans to join the occupation army with the organization of the United States Colored Troops too, which created another source of friction.

Despite the Confederacy's devastating loss of General Stonewall Jackson at Chancellorsville in May 1863, Lee's brilliant victory embroidered with gold his cloak of invincibility.

A month later, that garment lay on the ground beside the prospects for Confederate independence following the dual defeats at Vicksburg and Gettysburg the first week of July. An overwhelming Rebel victory two months later on the bloody grounds of Chickamauga injected the South with renewed hope. But every battle, whether ending in victory or defeat, further depleted the South's scarcest resource: its manpower.

Although the North did seemingly draw on an endless supply of humanity to fill its ranks, the sorrow of each battlefield death scraped away Union resolve.

Retaining hope for Union victory, Lincoln continued perfecting his design for reconstruction, which would withstand the challenge of constitutionality. West Virginia had already broken away from Virginia and entered the Union as a new state on June 1,

1863, posing another controversial legal question. Lincoln announced his initial plan in early December in 1863.

He proposed persons taking a loyalty oath including acceptance of emancipation would receive a pardon. All property, except for that which had already been redistributed and slaves, would be restored. Individuals excluded would include high ranking military officers and civil officials, anyone who resigned a U.S. judicial, military, or congressional position, and those guilty of mistreating black or white prisoners of war.

Once 10 percent of the number of men who had voted in the 1860 election had taken the oath in their state, that state could reenter the Union. Lincoln hoped to restore a number of state governments padded with voters supportive of his administration for the 1864 election, fearing that a Democratic administration would rescind emancipation.

In the midsummer of 1864 the Union appeared farther from victory than it ever had. Northern dissenters doubted if General Grant, the man Lincoln promoted to commander of the entire U.S. Army, was capable of anything except smoking cigars and sending thousands of soldiers to their graves.

The Confederates' grand strategy of not achieving a crushing victory but rather just outlasting a war-weary North was coming to fruition with the looming November presidential election.

Their tactic abruptly collapsed with the capture of Atlanta in early September, all but insuring the president's reelection with Union victory on the horizon.

Plans for reconstructing the country commenced in earnest. Some focused on punishing the South for causing the conflict. Radicals such as General Benjamin Butler suggested even redrawing southern state boundaries to obliterate their heritages and destroy any remnants of prewar power bases.

Other radicals proposed confiscating southern plantations and reapportioning them to the slaves.

Lincoln recognized the wartime freedom granted to blacks would carry an entirely different set of issues once the federal government attempted to assimilate them into Southern society after the war.

He committed himself to draft the blueprint for reconstruction rather than to allow congress to grab the political football and run, wherever it might lead. He did realize with his wartime powers ceasing with peace, he would need to recognize the legislators' wishes to some degree.

The president moved forward intent upon placing emancipation on a firm foundation. The prerequisite remained to justify the Emancipation Proclamation as a legitimate wartime measure. Secondly, he needed to induce white society either individually or as individual states to abolish slavery. To seal the deal, there needed to be a U.S. Constitutional amendment passed.

With the war's end in sight, he now also enjoyed the luxury of no longer having to move slowly to avoid offending southern loyalists and those in the Border States. No longer needing to court them, he enjoyed the position of being able to lay down the law. Yet he wanted to move forward at the proper pace, acknowledging that sticky matters such as black suffrage lay before him.

While addressing emancipation, Lincoln did sincerely desire to heal the nation, as evidenced by excerpts from the conclusion of his second inaugural address — his own words, written long before politicians employed staffs of speech writers: “With malice toward none; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive to finish the work; to bind up the nation's wounds; to do all that we may achieve and cherish a lasting peace among ourselves, and with all nations.”

Today we can only ponder how reconstruction would have evolved with Lincoln at the helm. Surely it would not have followed the path paved by Andrew Johnson's ineptness. We must also remember nations eager to move away from war often are anxious to move away from the leaders who guided them through those dark days. We only have to look back to the end of World War II. After Germany capitulated, the British ousted Winston Churchill even before Japan surrendered.

Randy Koch is president of the Erie County Historical Society