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Ruth E. Cook, Editorial Assistant. Published each month by the
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THE EMANCIPATION PROCLAMATION AS AN ACT OF FOREIGN POLICY: A MYTH DISPELLED

Much of the twentieth century's cynicism about the Emancipation Proclamation has been effectively countered in recent years. Many voices have been raised against the view that the proclamation was reluctantly issued, lacked genuine humanitarian motivation, and really freed no one. Those ideas, championed earlier in our century by serious and knowledgeable historians, are now the property mainly of smug know-it-alls who in fact have not kept up with developments in Lincoln scholarship. All that remains as a serious legacy from the old cynical view can be summed up in two propositions: (1) as Richard Hofstadter put it, the Emancipation Proclamation was written "with all the moral grandeur of a bill of lading" and (2) it was in part an act of foreign policy aimed at gaining England's friendship for the Northern cause by appealing to her antislavery sentiments.

Yet, if one pauses to think about them, those two propositions become mutually contradictory. The contradiction failed to be noticed in the past because each proposition neatly served the ultimate purpose of demeaning the Emancipation Proclamation. Cynics saw in the cold legalese of the document's

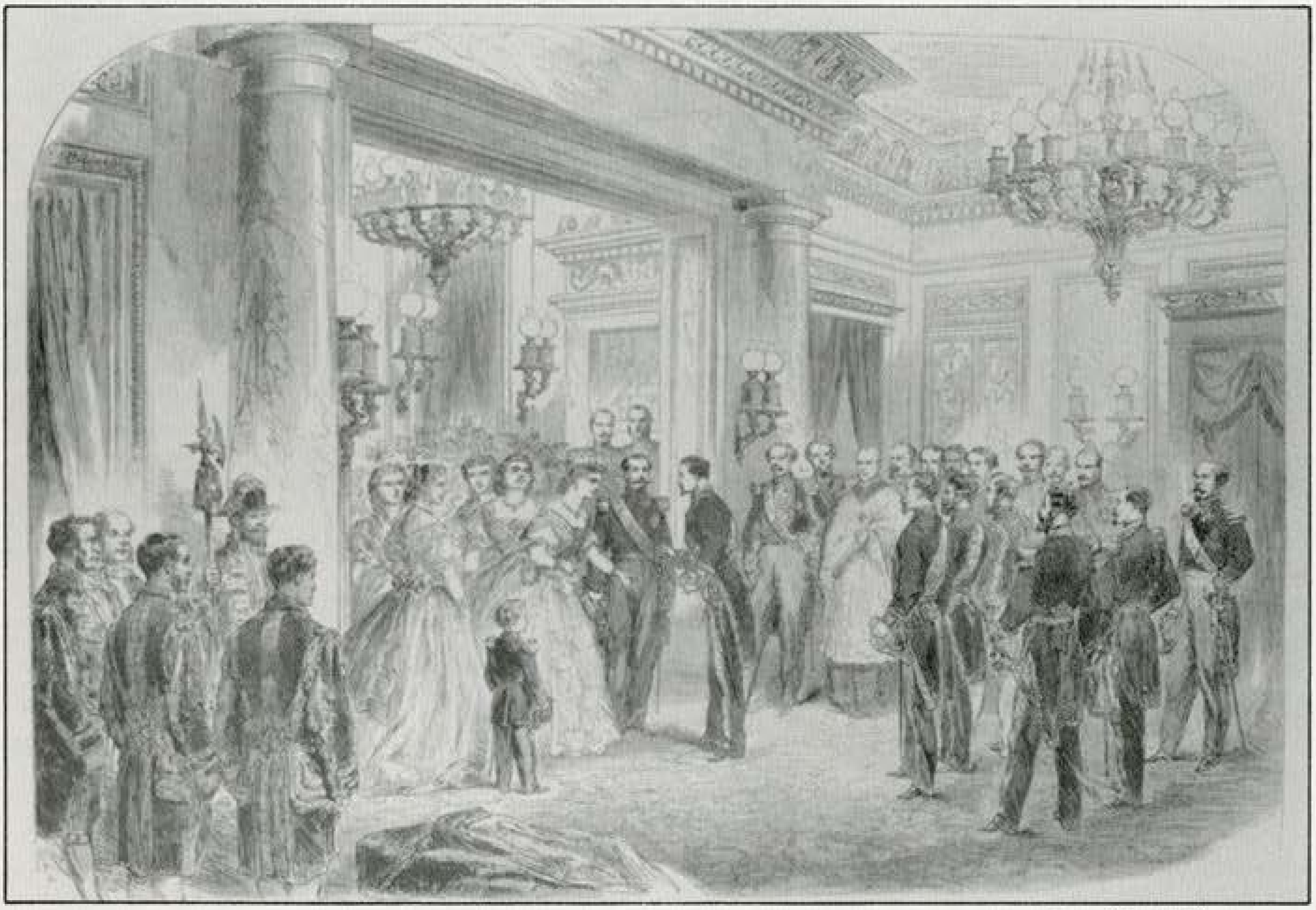

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FIGURE 1. Did Lincoln have the courts of Europe in mind when he drafted the Emancipation Proclamation early in the summer of 1862 — or when he delayed its issuance until the fall?

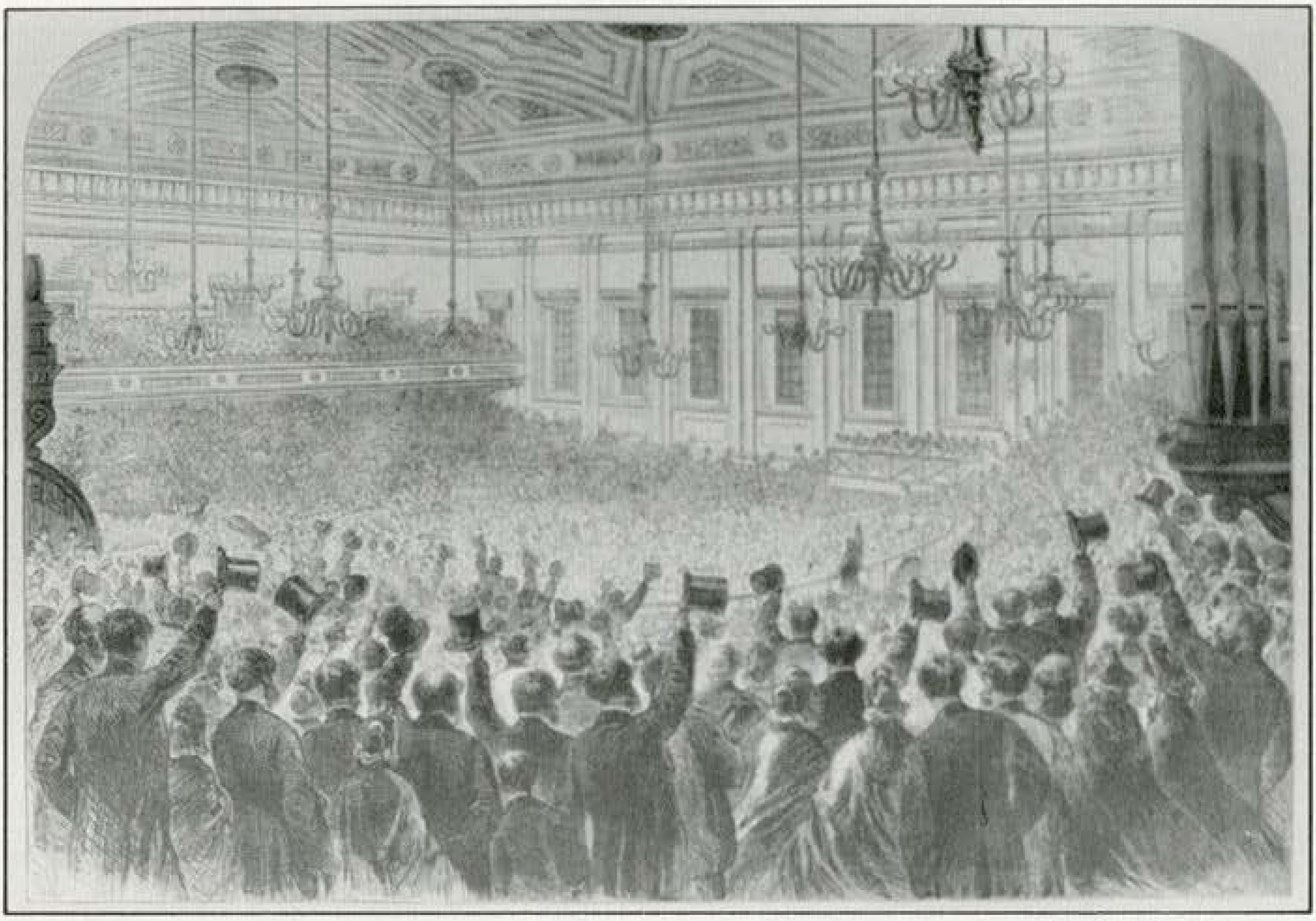

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FIGURE 2. London antislavery rally after the Emancipation Proclamation. British newspapers said no one important was there.

language telltale signs of Lincoln's lack of sincerely emotional commitment to freeing the slaves. And by pointing to its foreign policy purposes, the critics of the Emancipation Proclamation found still another ulterior motive beyond humanitarian concern for the plight of the black man. But how could Lincoln elicit the passions of antislavery morality with a document that sounded like a property abstract?

Although the president left foreign policy mainly to Secretary of State William H. Seward, Lincoln did know what to do when called upon to appeal to the moral sympathies of the greater world. Less than three weeks after issuing the final Emancipation Proclamation, he addressed a public letter to the workingmen of Manchester, England, who were suffering bitterly as a result of the "cotton famine" brought about by the halt of the flow of cotton supplies from the Southern states of the United States. In that letter Lincoln denounced the Southern rebellion as an "attempt to overthrow this government, which was built upon the foundation of human rights, and to substitute for it one which should rest exclusively on the basis of human slavery." Thus he used the phrase "human rights" which has rung out in liberal American foreign policy for over a century. He also commended the British workers for their "sublime Christian heroism" in suffering severe economic depression for "the ultimate and universal triumph of justice, humanity, and freedom."

Instead of ultimates and universals and sublimities, Lincoln lumbered the Emancipation Proclamation with *to wits* and *whereases* and *thereofs*. Such uninspiring language from a man who could turn on the inspiration when he needed to seems proof that the document was not intended to inspire world opinion.

But one finds nearly universal agreement in the historical literature on the Emancipation Proclamation — especially at the textbook level which reaches and shapes the most minds — that the document was aimed at world opinion. Willie Lee Rose, for example, writing in the distinguished text *The National Experience* said:

> [The Emancipation Proclamation] caused the English to postpone their decision on whether or not to step forward as mediators in the American war. Without the Emancipation Proclamation, the Battle of Antietam might have lent force to the mediationists' argument that the war had become a bloody stalemate. But emancipation ennobled the Northern war effort in the eyes of most Englishmen, and it would now be much harder for the British to abandon neutrality.

Harvard's David Donald wrote, in a book which emphasized the similarities in the ways the North and South fought the war, even to the point that both sides moved eventually to free and arm the Negroes:

> Although the Union and Confederate governments moved toward emancipation and arming the blacks because of military necessity, both recognized how profoundly their actions affected the continuing struggle for European recognition and support. . . . so long as neither government took a bold stand against the South's peculiar institution, European leaders were puzzled and divided by the war.
>
> Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation ended the confusion.

Even LaWanda Cox, who has a wonderfully sensitive understanding of Lincoln's language in the Emancipation Proclamation ("It must have taken great restraint for a man with so eloquent a way with words and so firm a conviction of the wrong of slavery to have fashioned the Emancipation Proclamation in a style that has been likened to that of a bill of lading"), said that "few except Lincoln's political opponents have questioned the military and foreign policy advantages of the Emancipation Proclamation." And Grant biographer William McFeely has written that the Emancipation Proclamation "did the Confederacy great damage abroad," and one of its principal advantages was the "gain of security from European political intervention."

The Emancipation Proclamation did not help in Europe, and it is doubtful that anyone except the most partisan antislavery enthusiasts expected it to. British Prime Minister Lord Palmerston called it "a singular manifesto that could scarcely be treated seriously. It is not easy to estimate how utterly powerless and contemptible a government must have become which could sanction such trash." Palmerston's was about the only opinion that really mattered, because he guided the most powerful country in the world and the one most likely to intervene on the Confederacy's behalf (in order to restore the flow of Southern cotton to Europe). The effect was, nevertheless, nearly universal in high government circles in Great Britain. Foreign Secretary Lord John Russell, for example, drafted a memorandum less than a month after the issuance of the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation recommending intervention and citing as the most important reason the new threat of a bloody slave revolt, or, as Russell put it, because of the "premium . . . given to acts of plunder, of incendiarism, and of revenge." American diplomats regarded Russell as an ardent abolitionist; Samuel Ward, one of Seward's regular informers, once referred to "Lord John Russell's Fanatical abolitionism." And Palmerston had strong antislavery convictions, as David B. Davis has recently shown in *Slavery and Human Progress*.

William Stuart, British chargé d'affaires in Washington called the proclamation "cold, vindictive and entirely political." The London *Times* recoiled in racist revulsion, saying that Lincoln had appealed in the document "to the black blood of the African; he will whisper of the pleasures of spoil and of the gratification of yet fiercer instincts; and when the blood begins to flow and shrieks come piercing through the darkness, Mr. Lincoln will wait till the rising flames tell that all is consummated, and then he will rub his hands and think that revenge is sweet." Monsieur Drouyn de Lhuys, a French government minister, also wrote a proposal for European intervention in the American Civil War not long after the issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation. This proposal was in part a direct response to the document, as James E. Harvey, an American diplomat in Lisbon, recognized and pointed out to Seward:

> Your quick eye will not fail to discern at once, that the prompting or pretext of this movement, was the President's proclamation; for although M. Drouyn de Lhuys adroitly strives to cover up that idea under smooth professions, "it sticks out," as we say, in the suggestion of "a servile war."

The evidence that the Emancipation Proclamation, if it was an act of foreign policy, failed miserably, is abundant and irrefutable.

That the Emancipation Proclamation was never *intended* as an act of foreign policy is a little more difficult to prove, but, even without plunging into the diplomatic correspondence of the era, one can recall aspects of the well known history of the proclamation which point to that conclusion. After all, the Secretary of State had opposed the issuance of the proclamation when President Lincoln first told his cabinet of his intentions in July 1862. And Seward had done so, at least in part, for foreign policy reasons. He had argued in that historic cabinet meeting that, among other things, the proclamation might cause European powers to intervene "to prevent the abolition of slavery for the sake of cotton," the production of which might, with emancipation, be disturbed for sixty years. Moreover, it was the objections of the Secretary of State — and not of Montgomery Blair, for example, who had argued that the proclamation would cause the Republicans to lose the off-year elections that coming November — which carried the day and caused Lincoln to postpone the issuance of the document. Foreign policy considerations, then, and not political ones delayed the proclamation.

William H. Seward, although he was, like Lincoln, a sincere antislavery veteran, nevertheless had by the time of the Civil War developed his own rather peculiar views on precisely how slavery would end in America. Seward held that the very beginning of the war, the firing on Fort Sumter, made the abolition of slavery inevitable, as long as the North won the war. Therefore, he seems to have deemed it a waste of time and effort and breath ever after to do or say anything by way of condemning slavery. Seward was an optimist, in short, who thought that it was silly to worry about anything except winning the war. After the July cabinet meeting at which Lincoln proposed issuing the proclamation, Seward wrote to his wife: "Proclamations are paper, without the support of armies. It is mournful to see that a great nation shrinks from a war it has accepted, and insists on adopting proclamations, when it is asked for force."

When the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation was issued the following September, Seward and the Lincoln administration in general did little to exploit its appeal to idealism. The Secretary of State, like most diplomats on either side of the water, clung to a hard-boiled attitude toward foreign affairs. As he told Norman Judd, the minister to Prussia, on October 22, 1862, "However public opinion abroad may be influenced by passions interests or prejudices unfavorable to the United States, it is not doubted that foreign governments will govern their proceedings by the actual condition of affairs. If this condition is carefully examined, the result will show that the Union is practically unbroken, while the [Confederacy] is undergoing a rapid process of exhaustion."

Charles Francis Adams, who represented the United States government in London and who personally held antislavery convictions, wrote a gloomy letter to Seward about six weeks after the issuance of the preliminary proclamation, saying:

> I much doubt whether my stay [in England] will extend far into the next year under any circumstances. And as time goes on, it will probably become more and more of a trial. Our military progress which alone could save it seems provokingly dilatory.

Emphasizing the need for "force," pointing to the "actual condition of affairs," and feeling that military progress "alone" could save the United States cause were characteristic of the diplomats.

Barring some absolutely barbarous activity, military success was all that interested diplomats on either side of the Atlantic. The Emancipation Proclamation did interest the diplomats but only in so far as it was a sign or symbol of the military success or failure of the Union armies. One can see this preoccupation in a letter of November 14, 1862, from John Bigelow, in Paris, to Seward:

> I never expected that the proclamation would be put upon the bayonets of an advancing army. That hope I abandoned long ago, for I observed that when our army advanced the adversaries of the Presidents prolamation-policy, multiplied. It was after the great disasters which convulsed the country from time to time that it became practicable to invoke the aid of the slave.

Whatever the personal sentiments of the diplomat in regard to the right and wrong of slavery, he was keenly interested in figuring out whether the Emancipation Proclamation was a sign of strength or of weakness. Its abstract morality and its practical effects on black people were of little diplomatic interest.

Even the propaganda value of the document was of little interest. This is confirmed by the way Seward handled the transmission to Europe of the news that the preliminary proclamation had been issued. The current meaning of the term "propaganda" is of twentieth-century origin and was unknown to Seward's age, and it is unrealistic and ahistorical to fault a nineteenth-century government for failing to conduct a "media blitz." On the other hand, Seward was a successful politician in an age of democracy, and he knew well the importance of public opinion. Therefore, it is significant that the text of the proclamation, when communicated to America's diplomats in Europe, was accompanied by a circular letter from Seward emphasizing that emancipation was an act of military policy alone — as if Lincoln's uninspiring document, with its repeated references to his powers as commander in chief, needed any such damper on its already chilly spirit. The reaction of John Bigelow, in Paris, was perhaps predictable: "I have had your circular accompanying the Presidents proclamation, extensively published here because I thought it was calculated to improve the effect of that document."

Seward did nothing to give the Emancipation Proclamation broad and spectacular circulation in Europe. Peter Sinclair, of Scotland, who was prominent in the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, wrote Seward almost two months after the issuance of the preliminary proclamation, telling the Secretary of State that he was hard at work getting the society to organize public meetings in support of Lincoln's policy. But, Sinclair said, "We want documents to give to the press [and] to the leaders of the people. We have no way of getting them unless they are sent from Washington. Pray take means to have them supplied." The State Department obviously had not bothered to send documents about the Emancipation Proclamation to the leaders of the antislavery movement in England. "Pardon me," Sinclair added, "this do nothing policy will not do in this emergency."

Even liberal politicians like William Gladstone kept their eyes fixed firmly upon the question of military progress of failure. He told an American correspondent in November 27, 1862, that the North incurred a heavy responsibility in persevering with a destructive and hopeless war. True, the Emancipation Proclamation was interesting: "Another view of the matter not to be overlooked is its [the war's] bearing on the interests of the Black and Coloured race. I believe the separation to be one of the few happy events that have marked their mournful history." Then Gladstone dropped the other shoe: "But there is one aspect of the War which transcends every other; — the possibility of success."

The Illustrated London News gave a similar interpretation:

> We only say, . . . that while the previous anti-slavery measures, such as . . . the abolition of slavery in Columbia, the anti-slave trade treaty with England, the permanent exclusion of slavery from the territories, and the offer of Congress to assist the work of abolition by compensation, all obviously sprang from a genuinely anti-slavery sentiment, this particular proclamation, the last of the series, as obviously did not, but from the military failures of the North.

If Seward and the diplomats seem to have leaned toward the view that the Emancipation Proclamation was largely irrelevant to foreign policy, this says nothing for certain of the views of the author of that document. As much as any act of the Lincoln administration, and perhaps more than most, the Emancipation Proclamation was the president's act. He was not urged to it by the cabinet. In the end, they in fact delayed it. Lincoln decided on his own to write the document and for his own reasons. Did those reasons include, in any profound way, considerations of foreign policy?

The evidence seems overwhelmingly to suggest that foreign policy was hardly even a remote consideration with the author of the Emancipation Proclamation. The uninspiring language of the document suggests that this is the case. And so does the horrible foreign policy gaffe Lincoln committed when he issued the preliminary proclamation. In that version he ordered the military and naval authorities to "do no act or acts to repress such persons [that is, slaves in Confederate states] . . . in any effort they may make for their actual freedom." This awkward and inappropriately worded injunction was meant to say that the administration would no longer enforce the Fugitive Slave Law. But it actually sounded like an invitation to servile insurrection, and was so interpreted by men as important as Lord John Russell and Drouyn de Lhuys. On the advice of Seward, Salmon P. Chase, and Gideon Wells, Lincoln would alter that passage and include in the final proclamation of January 1, 1863, an injunction upon the freedom "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."

This is a well known episode in the evolution of the Emancipation Proclamation, but its true meaning for the theory that the proclamation was an act of foreign policy seems never to have been made clear: Lincoln was so preoccupied with domestic considerations in drafting the document that he wrote a passage sure to have devastatingly awful effect in Europe. He completely forgot that the proclamation would have foreign policy implications.

Moreover, William H. Seward had been telling foreign governments, up to the time of the Emancipation Proclamation, that the reason the United States was not making any moves to free the slaves was that they might cause a bloody slave revolt. Up to September 1862, in other words, spreading the fear of slave insurrection as a likely consequence of emancipation was the Lincoln administration's foreign policy. When Lincoln drafted the proclamation, he simply was not thinking about foreign policy.

Finally, at the famous July 1862 cabinet meeting the Secretary of State reminded Lincoln of the implications of the proposed emancipation proclamation for foreign policy. Unless Lincoln waited for a military victory, the proclamation would look like "a last measure of an exhausted government, a cry for help." Lincoln later told painter Francis B. Carpenter that he had been impressed by that argument. To the extent that Lincoln thought of the foreign policy implications of the proclamation afterward, it was not as a matter of splendid antislavery sentiments to sway the idealistic masses of Europe but as proof that the North was now, after a military victory, successful enough to free the slaves of its enemies.

The Emancipation Proclamation, as an act of foreign policy, was at most intended as a sign or symbol of Northern military success. Lincoln, by the circumstances of the public announcement of the Emancipation Proclamation in September 1862, had been brought fully in line with Seward's foreign policy, which aimed to impress the Europeans with military force and not with the high-sounding words of paper proclamations.

When Lincoln defended the proclamation from election-year critics in 1864, he admitted he had been "not entirely confident" back in 1862 that the proclamation would result in "greater gain than loss." "More than a year of trial," he could boast, "now shows no loss by it in our foreign relations, none in our home popular sentiment, none in our white military force, — no loss by it any how or any where." In that statement, Lincoln revealed his fear that the proclamation might have turned public opinion against the administration, caused a decline in enlistments, *and* hurt the United States abroad. He risked *everything*, including foreign policy, for the sake of freeing the slaves.