The Emancipation Proclamation 3

The Emancipation Proclamation declared that as of the date of its issuance, January 1st, 1863, all the slaves that were in states that were still in rebellion against the Union, would be forever free. All throughout his life Lincoln had known, as he said, “If slavery is not wrong, then nothing is wrong.” The problem was, as he saw at the time when he was a young lawyer, the Constitution protected slavery in the starts where it already existed. So he was in a quandary all through the all through the 1850’s and the early 1860’s. Even within the north there was not a majority opinion at that time that emancipation should be a goal of the Union. And it was a fear that soldiers would not fight for emancipation. Having wrestled with the problem for months, Lincoln begins to realize that even if he couldn’t get at it with a Congressional law; he could possibly reach slavery through his Commander and Chief powers and his war powers. What he was able to understand was that the slaves were being used by the Confederates to dig trenches, build fortifications, as teamsters, as cooks, as hospital attendants, etc. In all those ways they were helping the Confederate cause and hurting the northern cause. If he could emancipate the slaves as part of his war powers as a way of strategically helping the Union win the war, then he could finally reach at it. He was very happy to have come to that formulation. Lincoln brings his cabinet officers together and he tells them, “I have made a decision about what I’m going to tell you. I will listen to your suggestions perhaps about timing and minor implementations of it, but the decisions has already been made.” The one suggestion he was most importantly willing to accept came from his Secretary of State, Seward, who suggested that if he were to issue the Proclamation that July, at a time when they just had these terrible reverses in the field, it would look like an act of desperation. That it would look like, perhaps, a retreat from the purposes of the war. And so he said to instead wait “until the eagle of victory comes” and Lincoln thought that was right. He waited until that September when the victory at Antietam came so he could issue it without it seeming like an act of desperation.