



Lincoln's Gamble: How the Emancipation Proclamation Changed the Course of the Civil War

Todd Brewster

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A brilliant, authoritative, and riveting account of the most critical six months in Abraham Lincoln's presidency, when he penned the Emancipation Proclamation and changed the course of the Civil War.

On July 12, 1862, Abraham Lincoln spoke for the first time of his intention to free the slaves. On January 1, 1863, Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation, doing precisely that. In between, however, was perhaps the most tumultuous six months of his presidency, an episode during which the sixteenth president fought bitterly with his generals, disappointed his cabinet, and sank into painful bouts of clinical depression. Most surprising, the man who would be remembered as "The Great Emancipator" did not hold firm to his belief in emancipation. He agonized over the decision and was wracked by private doubts almost to the moment when he inked the decree that would change a nation.

Popular myth would have us believe that Lincoln did not suffer from such indecision, that he did what he did through moral resolve; that he had a commanding belief in equality, in the inevitable victory of right over wrong. He worked on drafts of the document for months, locking it in a drawer in the telegraph room of the War department. Ultimately Lincoln chose to act based on his political instincts and knowledge of the war. It was a great gamble, with the future of the Union, of slavery, and of the presidency itself hanging in the balance.

In this compelling narrative, Todd Brewster focuses on these critical six months to ask: was it through will or by accident, intention or coincidence, personal achievement or historical determinism that he freed the slaves? The clock is always ticking in these pages as Lincoln searches for the right moment to enact his proclamation and simultaneously turn the tide of war. *Lincoln's Gamble* portrays the president as an imperfect man with an unshakable determination to save a country he believed in, even as the course of the Civil War remained unknown.

Lincoln's Gamble: How the Emancipation Proclamation Changed the Course of the Civil War Details

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From Reader Review Lincoln's Gamble: How the Emancipation Proclamation Changed the Course of the Civil War for online ebook

Danny Adams says

(Transparency note: My review copy was provided by the author, but that did not influence my review.)

More than one hundred and fifty years after the Emancipation Proclamation went into effect, it seems to Americans nowadays to be one of two things: either a fait accompli, maybe even a divine current of history that Lincoln was hardly more than the instrument for; or one of the greatest signs of the tyrant that Lincoln was. Using details that pull together extensive threads of Lincoln's background and the background of the years leading up to the 1860s, Brewster makes the case that neither one of these is true, but rather that Lincoln - after a great deal of self-doubt - used the Proclamation to both seize a strategic advantage in the war while simultaneously bringing to fruition something he had, eventually, come to believe.

To this day people still argue about whether or not the Civil War had anything to do with slavery. Those who say no and those who say yes are both right, though as Brewster points out using contemporary quotes, the arguments are usually backwards. That is, the North initially had no interest in fighting to abolish slavery - the majority of even those who favored ending slavery in the North wanted to do so gradually for a variety of reasons, and certainly not with a war. Whereas Southern leaders like Jefferson Davis and the vice-president, Alexander Stephens, proudly proclaimed in 1861 and 1862 that yes, secession and the war were indeed about protecting slavery, including quoting Stephens' too-little known "Cornerstone Speech", in which he said that defending slavery was the cornerstone of the creation of the Confederacy.

Meanwhile, Lincoln himself wavered, as Brewster chronicles. He was against slavery, but only wished to abolish it gradually like the majority. He reasoned that an instant abolition would destroy the Southern (and eventually American) economy, and also made no bones about the fact that he didn't think blacks were equal to whites. Brewster details a visit of black leaders to the White House, for instance, where Lincoln told them straight up that blacks were to blame for the war, and the best thing for America would be for all blacks to be somewhere else. Likewise, his religious beliefs wavered, this president who never joined a church. While Lincoln invariably believed in God, his interpretation of what God wanted differed over the years, on the issue of slavery no less than anything else.

The picture of Lincoln Brewster portrays at the beginning of the Civil War is someone whose greatest, most adamant belief was that the Union must be preserved, and he will seize whatever opportunity presents itself to hold the United States together. Lincoln's famous quote that he would keep slavery or abolish it, whichever saved the Union, seems to have been made in earnest. Lincoln even went so far as to try offering peace and forgiveness and a welcome home to rebelling states so long as they agreed to gradually abolish slavery. (Obviously, the states refused.) And so initially, the Emancipation Proclamation becomes a major tool in winning the war, not just an end to itself.

But ultimately, Brewster continues, over the months that Lincoln wavered about the Proclamation, debated for and against it, rewrote it, waited for some great Union victory to make it seem like it was coming from a position of strength rather than a desperate gamble born of weakness, something happened. As 1862 drew closer to 1863, the more Lincoln came to believe in the power of freeing the slaves as another, more metaphorical way to save the Union.

There have been complaints here on Goodreads that Brewster digresses too much, and it's true that many of

the chapters aren't exactly linear. But nothing in them is gratuitous; every piece fits into a whole, and that whole is how Lincoln reluctantly but eventually came around to the idea of total abolition. Brewster has a talent for humanizing the man he points out the beginning of the book was practically deified within a generation of his lifetime if not sooner - if not right after Wilkes' bullet killed Lincoln - and portraying the tangle of thoughts and fears and hopes that must have gone through Lincoln's mind during the tragedies and sufferings of 1862.

If I have any complaint about the book it would be that I would prefer to have footnotes or end notes citing specific quotes and other sources Brewster uses, rather than just the general bibliography. I understand that this is more the style of a book aimed at a popular audience rather than a scholarly one, but there is so much information packed into the book that I want to keep it close as a handy reference, too.

If you're looking for details of battles and similar things, look elsewhere. If you want to try to understand Lincoln's mind and how it was a product of his times, this is the book you'll want to read.

EDIT: I had it pointed out to me that there are indeed end notes, just not cited by number within the text but rather by chapter, then keywords or phrases.

John says

In 1862, Abraham Lincoln was President in the midst of one of America's greatest crises: The Civil War. While both the North and the South believed that a short "glorious" war would be waged and over rather quickly, after some of the first bloody battles it became apparent that this war between country men would be anything but short or glorious. In the many decades after the war, the names of Lincoln, Grant, Lee, and many others have filled the pages of multiple history books, as has had the causes of the war itself. Many events and battles of the war have become part of the American cultural landscape and common history. For example, Gettysburg, a previously little known and small town which became the site of one of the war's pivotal battles, is now one of the country's best-known, and oft-visited National Parks. The iconic image of Abraham Lincoln in his stovepipe hat is well known to many children and his name has been given to towns, streets, buildings, a memorial – and his very visage accompanies our currency. Do we take for granted that we really know Lincoln, and that we know what the war is about? Since Lincoln's sayings and words have seeped into our national lexicon, do we assume to truly understand his thinking about the war and his ideas about why it was waged?

Todd Brewster's book, **Lincoln's Gamble: The Tumultuous Six Months that Gave America the Emancipation Proclamation and Changed the Course of the Civil War**, is an examination into of Lincoln's thinking that evolved into the famous document, The Emancipation Proclamation and how it changed the war, and how it reflected or maybe resulted in clarifying Lincoln's positions and ideas about slavery and why the war should be fought. The six month period that serves as the main timeframe of Brewster's book is from July of 1862 to January 1, 1863 when he formally signed the final version of the Emancipation Proclamation. During that period, from the time he began to ruminate and consider the intention to freeing the slaves, it was something that Lincoln refined and reconsidered over and over. It did crystalize in a shining moment, but rather resulted from a long process in which Lincoln considered the various legal, political and social angles and ramifications of such a move. He discussed the matter with members of his cabinet, but also rejected similar attempts by some of his generals to issue similar measures in their military stewardships.

Brewster does an excellent job getting the reader into the many questions and considerations that Lincoln

either wrote about, discussed or privately shared in letters or conversations. As a result, we have a more nuanced, imperfect and yet- honest portrait of a man wrestling with the momentous issue of his time.

Lincoln's Gamble takes care to illustrate that Lincoln's highest priority was preservation of the Union, but that he was also against the institution of slavery. He demonstrates the aspects and efforts of Lincoln's push for colonization as a potential solution and confrontation with sympathizers and abolitionists with their own agenda. Perhaps one of the best traits of the book is that Brewster does not shy from Constitutional conundrums that perplexed and faced Lincoln and the nation- not just about slavery but the process of waging war, including the troubling problems with suspending habeas corpus. Sometimes the reading provokes more questions and thinking than it does easy answers, and that's fine because no one person, other than Lincoln himself, can truly know all of his thoughts and ideas. What we are presented with, however, is what feels like a very close facsimile – an examination of the man and the struggle to keep the Union together, but also remove that inhuman stain of slavery from the nation.

Helpfully, Brewster adds the different versions of the Proclamation in the appendix, but I also would like to have read more about what happened after the war in how the Proclamation obtained a place in our history and cultural myth. (Maybe he would consider an article somewhere when the paperback edition is released to talk about it.) He wrote so well about how we arrived at that moment, that I felt that things ended too early- that he would have done an excellent job at talking about the Proclamation's place since the war (although he does tell us about the fate of the Proclamation itself- where the versions ultimately physically end up). Although the book covers a six month time frame, the author does jump back and forth a bit to prove context for the themes of each chapter. Some readers may have some difficulty with that; I did not, but I can see where some might prefer more of a traditional chronological progression. I believe the book is more about the process and the man and the document, so I also see the necessity for the organizational structure. Perhaps the larger difficult of the book for me was the change in Lincoln after he signs the final document seems a bit too abrupt. Brewster goes to great lengths to have us understand that colonization was Lincoln's preferred strategy and that the Proclamation was devised as a military strategy to withstand Constitutional scrutiny. But once the document is finally presented, Brewster discusses Lincoln as given over to emancipation and waging the war to completely end slavery- and while morally Lincoln was there for many years before, and unquestionably he was there after January 1863, it would be helpful to see more of the change in his thinking as it happened.

Lincoln's Gamble is an excellent portrait of a not so much of the man who became an American icon and legendary historical figure, but the man who was President and struggled to find a way to repair the breech in the Union and Constitution the best way he knew how. The story also offers inspiration in the story in how difficult, but important decisions and life-altering moves are made. While this year the 150th Anniversary of the end of the Civil War is remembered, Lincoln's Gamble is a welcome volume that allows us a window into one of the more important moments of that conflict that helped to alter the course of our history.

Note; I was provided a copy of this book by author for an honest and thoughtful review.

Casey Wheeler says

I received a prerelease e-copy of this book through NetGalley (publication date September 9, 2014) with the expectation that I will post a review on their site and others (my blog, Goodreads, Facebook, Google +, LinkedIn, Twitter, Amazon, etc.).

I requested this book as I have read a great deal about President Lincoln and the title and description intrigued me. This is the first book by Todd Brewster that I have read.

I found the book well written, documented and easy to read. The author did an excellent job of laying the groundwork for the eventual release of the Emancipation Proclamation. Lincoln did waver on its content over time and slowly developed the final document after considerable vetting with various individuals including his cabinet and others. Brewster also addressed the mental state of the President during this time and how it impacted the final document.

My only criticism of the book is that certain chapters tended to wander far afield from the subject in the amount of detail that they went into not related to the primary subject of the book. The one on George McClellan is a good example.

I recommend this book for anyone who is interested in understanding more about the thought process of President Lincoln, the development of the Emancipation Proclamation and the Civil War in general.

Josh says

So often when people are pivotal in the accomplishment of something great they end up becoming something mythical in our imaginations. We begin to see them as caricatures, good or bad, and very often miss the fact that they are people. If this is true of anyone in American history, it is especially true of Abraham Lincoln. The Western world has become inundated with Lincoln material from the time he stepped into office. As Todd Brewster points out, we have seen,

Lincoln books on every conceivable aspect of his life and career, many of them setting out, Parson Weems style, to create the Lincoln legend: “Honest Abe,” “Abe, the Redeemer,” “Lincoln: Man of the People,” “Master of Men,” and, of course, “The Great Emancipator.” Thankfully, the trend long ago abated. A tempering of the Lincoln myth occurred in the post–World War II era, with some authors going too far in the other direction, laying him out to be racist, incompetent, devious, and certainly no subject for national reverence. Still, the cascade of Lincoln volumes has continued unabated, and a glance through the entire list shows just how inventive the researching mind can be. In addition to traditional biographies and histories there is *The Life of Abraham Lincoln for Young People: Told in Words of One Syllable*; *The Personal Finances of Abraham Lincoln*; *Abraham Lincoln on the Coming of the Caterpillar Tractor*; and, first published only a decade ago, *The Physical Lincoln*, including the following chapters: “Lips,” “Gut,” “Skull,” “Muscles,” “Skin,” “Eyes,” “Height,” and “Joints.” According to World Cat, the global online library catalog, 23,274 books and updated and new editions of books, have been written on Lincoln. (So how original am I? As you read this, you are holding the 23,275th.)

I will have to be honest, like the subject of this book, and point out that I fall just a bit short of having read 23,000+ books on Abraham Lincoln. I feel safe in saying that *Lincoln’s Gamble* by Brewster, however, is one of the good ones. Taking “one slice of Lincoln’s life”, the greatest slice, Brewster dives into the very real world that this very real person played the pivotal role in this very great event.

Brewster takes a focused look at the pivotal time of Lincoln's presidency, the leading up to the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation. This "in-between moment" for Lincoln would end up cementing his mythical, hero, untouchable status in the minds of many, if not most. This time, wrought with life, politics, war, fear, human frailties, human emotions, human prejudice, pragmatism, shortsightedness, grand vision, support, criticism, success, and failure—this was the time of Lincoln's Gamble and this was the moment that the man Abe became the hero, the emancipator, Abraham Lincoln.

Brewster does a great job setting the stage for Lincoln's Gamble. He shows the world: cultural, political, and economic in which Lincoln found himself living. He shows the men: generals, politicians, and friends that Lincoln found himself leading. He shows the hardships: war, death, marriage, and parenting, that Lincoln found himself enduring. All of this to set the scene for the greatest decision Lincoln would ever have to make—a decision that would affect millions for generations. Maybe we elevate Lincoln as we do simply because he was able to persevere through all of this and actually make a decision, or even just keep going! For a man to take an action like this in a cultural and personal vacuum would have been difficult enough, to do it in the midst of all that he did was nothing short of amazing. And Brewster takes the reader on a tour Lincoln's struggles and helps the reader to feel a bit of what Lincoln had to have felt during this time.

What do we find in all of this? Abraham Lincoln was not perfect! Don't let pennies and \$5 bills fool you, he was a real person with real flaws and real struggles. For instance, would Lincoln be considered a racist today? He was not an abolitionist, he favored colonization of the slaves, and saw white man as superior to "Negroes". But does that make him a terrible person, or simply a person. One great benefit of this work is to see that Lincoln was a sinner, just like the rest of us. Not only that, but it helps the reader to see that to impose 21st century norms on a 19th century figure is anachronistic and utterly unfair. The caricature of Honest Abe the altruistic abolitionist is naïve and inaccurate. But the fact that this crooked stick was used to draw a mighty straight line should give us pause and bring praise to our mouths for as long as we remember! By the end of this book we should be able to say with W.E.B. Dubois that, "I love Lincoln. Not because he was perfect, but because he was not and yet triumphed."

*I received a review copy of this book from the publisher to offer a review.

*Quotes are from an ARC from the publisher.

Gregory Jones says

This book did a really nice job of covering the significance of the Emancipation Proclamation in its context. It fits a nice level of writing that is popular and flows well, but still holds substance. It's probably a book that is more for a pop audience than scholars, but even still could work really well for an undergraduate class. The book is quite readable. I would consider it for a class on 19th century US history or even the first half US survey. I will definitely recommend it to students who want to learn more about the Civil War.

Jon says

At the start the author explains why he wrote the book even though there are hundreds of Abraham Lincoln books. He narrows his focus on the 6 months up to the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation and presents an image of a troubled president not at all like the huge white statue seated in the Lincoln Monument in Washington DC. Brewster paints a picture a troubled man grappling with the bumbling and

hesitant general, a critical Supreme Court chief justice, a split cabinet and off course the Confederacy. I learned about the movement to sent the freed slaves back to Africa. I was amazed to learn that the state of Maryland established a colony in Africa for such a purpose.

I recommend this book for readers who are interested in US history and Abraham Lincoln.

Day Rusk says

I have read more than my fair share of books on America's 16th President, Abraham Lincoln. Since discovering a children's book on his life in grade one or two, I have been an admirer of the man, and have read quite a bit about him. In Todd Brewster's *Lincoln's Gamble* the author points out that "according to WorldCat, the global online library catalog, 23,274 books and updated and new editions of books have been written on Lincoln." Quite an impressive number for a man who at one time is believed to have feared he'd be lost to history.

So, why another book on Abraham Lincoln?

While I definitely haven't read 23,274 books on the man, the number is high enough to suggest there might be very little left to say regarding him and his career, however, not necessarily so. In recent years a couple of books (the one's I'm aware of) have come out specifically exploring Lincoln's road to releasing the Emancipation Proclamation, the document that put America on the road to freeing the Black race from slavery. Along with *Lincoln's Gamble*, Eric Foner's *The Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln and American Slavery*, comes to mind. What these books accomplish is putting a 'human' face on the 16th President of the United States, whose legacy and memory in some ways has become sacrosanct.

Considered America's greatest President, Lincoln is revered, and in revering him, we often forget he was a man faced with a Presidency that had to deal with some of the nation's most complex issues – and issues where one misstep could have spelled the end of the American nation as we know it today.

Lincoln freed the Slaves. The bloody American Civil War is seen as that Nation's punishment for allowing the institution of slavery to exist within its borders in the first place. When we look back at Lincoln, we see a man who took a great wrong and made it right, but we don't always appreciate how difficult that was to accomplish. Those who want to tarnish Lincoln's memory, point out that at one time he favored the colonization of the Negroes (once freed, they'd be shipped to Africa or some colony in South America), they try to prove that while he may have freed the slaves, he was not as pure in his heart as we'd like to believe. Books like *Lincoln's Gamble* and *The Fiery Trial* address these issues. As a man of his time, did Lincoln believe the Black man was the equal to the White man? Probably not, but this didn't stop his belief that even if they weren't equals, no one race of man should ever enslave another, taking away his freedom.

This may seem harsh, but that is from our perspective today, not the perspective of a man living in 1860's America. At the time, there were noted scientists who actually believed the Black man and the White man were two completely different races. One of the fears of freeing the slaves and allowing them to stay in America was the fear of interbreeding, as Brewster points out in *Lincoln's Gamble*. While they were aware that a liaison between a Black and White individual could lead to pregnancy and a child, they were confident that this interbreeding between two different races, would render that child sterile, and thus interbreeding was a threat to the continuation of the human race.

It seems silly, but that was one way they believed back then. Now put it in context today, about 150 years since Lincoln issued his Emancipation Proclamation, and we still have trouble dealing with the simple fact that we're all the same, our skin is merely of different pigmentations. As a supposedly enlightened, more sophisticated society, many of us still have problems, over something as simple as skin color; we've yet to fully learn that skin color does not define a person, what defines them is the quality of their character, and skin color has no bearing on that. Today, in the 21st Century, we still allow skin color to breed hate within us (not all, but still far too many), which seems utterly ridiculous. Knowing that, it is not hard to appreciate the absurdity of thought that prevailed regarding the races back in the 19th Century. Considering aspects such as this are part of the rewards in reading a book like Brewster's Lincoln's Gamble, in that it makes you think.

At the outbreak of the Civil War, many abolitionists believed Lincoln should have freed the slaves, and many of them, including freed Black intellectuals of that time criticized him for not doing so. None of them fully realized the dangers of doing so, and that is where Lincoln's brilliance or common sense played its role perfectly. During the early days of the struggle, Lincoln was smart enough to understand that if the North believed it was fighting a war over slavery (which in essence it was), would White soldiers continue the struggle, especially when they realized how long and bloody the conflict was going to become (initially Northern enrollment was for 90 days, everyone feeling the conflict would be resolved quickly). Lincoln knew he had to sell them on the concept that the war was being fought to preserve the integrity of the Union, or the Nation, and only that, as he wasn't so sure White men would gladly fight and die merely for the cause of the Black man and the end of the slavery.

What could have happened if Lincoln had done otherwise and lost the will of Northerners to continue the fight against the slave owning Southern neighbors; Brewster's book touches upon this, suggesting the South would have broken free of the North, formed their own Nation, and a nation that would have continued on with the institution of slavery. Lincoln and Northern leaders could have also sued for peace suggesting they would tolerate slavery as it was, but encourage the South towards a slow disintegration of the institution, with at one time a hundred year plan being suggested. It is impossible to believe now that a plan could have been put into place that would have seen the end of slavery come to America around the 1960's. How would that have shaped the country we know; could it even have been possible?

While watching the wholesale slaughter of so many Americans (the American Civil War is still America's deadliest and costliest war in terms of body count), deal with countrymen, politicians and army generals with such differing and demanding opinions on the course of action the nation should take – especially in regards to the slavery issue – Lincoln, an imperfect, human being, had to navigate treacherous waters in not only preserving the country, but also eliminating from it an institution that has also become one of its greatest embarrassments. Books like Lincoln's Gamble drive this point home, and in thought provoking ways.

Lincoln's Gamble by Todd Brewster is a quick and fascinating read; definitely one of the books on Abraham Lincoln worth exploring (unless you've got time for all 23,000), but I would also suggest that upon completing it you read Eric Foner's The Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln and American Slavery as it covers far more ground in Lincoln's thoughts on the slavery issue than just the six months leading up to the issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation in January of 1863 that Lincoln's Gamble covers. As companion pieces, they are two great reads, that not only educate and provoke thought, but also put a very 'human' face on a man who somehow found his way to do the right thing, in the right way, during a very volatile and dangerous time in America's history.

Dominic says

I received this book as a giveaway from the author on LinkedIn.

The major decisions of history appear to be simple. That is the advantage of hindsight. It is easy to see, roughly one hundred and fifty years later, the clear positives of the decision of emancipating the slaves by Abraham Lincoln. A race was set free from generations of bondage to experience the liberty that the nation afforded to white men in the 19th century. That decision, in its time, was not as simple as it appears a century and a half after the Emancipation Proclamation was signed. In “Lincoln’s Gamble: The Tumultuous Six Months That Gave America the Emancipation Proclamation and Changed the Course of the Civil War,” Todd Brewster expertly shows how the decision to free the slaves was extremely difficult. Brewster states the purpose of his work clearly. He wishes to show that the myth of Lincoln grew from making difficult decisions, and that the decision to emancipate the slaves may not have happened at all.

Throughout the work, Brewster shows the personalities of not only Lincoln, but key actors such as Gideon Welles, William Seward, Salmon Chase, and George McClellan. None of these men were friends, each with their own political ambitions and wishes in regards to the outcome of the Civil War. The careful, “gentlemanly” war strategy of McClellan led to serious casualties at Antietam, his removal from the Army of the Potomac, and the rise of the more pragmatic Ambrose Burnside. Disagreements over emancipating the slaves and a poor midterm election in 1862 led to dissention within the ranks of the Republican Party, including those closest to Lincoln. There was fierce political infighting between Seward and the team of Chase and Welles leading to the unaccepted resignations of both Seward and Chase. Lincoln avoided disaster.

The political infighting was a product of Lincoln’s plan to emancipate the slaves. Lincoln is portrayed as the shrewd lawyer, always careful to choose his words wisely. Lincoln wished to not have slavery expand, did not believe in racial equality, and thought that two races could not live harmoniously together. With these beliefs being common in 1862, the president attempted to ease emancipation into effect. He called emancipation a war time necessity, but was otherwise vague. By joining all sides of the emancipation argument he committed to none, leaving all options available. In the proclamation “there was something here for everyone and nothing for anyone” (pg. 165). He distanced himself further by claiming that emancipation was the work of God and he was doing His will. Although Calvinist predestination was not fully embraced by Lincoln, Brewster shows that Lincoln’s growing reliance on scripture and the belief that he was predestined to emancipate the slaves distances Lincoln from potentially catastrophic consequences.

In formulating the decision to emancipate the slaves, Lincoln is shown as the inward thinker that he is often portrayed. Brewster argues that Lincoln’s hesitation and lack of a distinct position demonstrates his knack for making the issues his own, immersing himself in them to the point of depression. Lincoln constantly questions the role of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution in regards to emancipation and government confiscation of private property. The worry that he was overstepping the limits of the executive office was with him for the entire six month period, and even shortly after the signing of the Proclamation. He ponders the idea of colonization of African Americans, and the legality of deportation, underestimating the black connection to the United States. The biggest concern was whether the document would prolong or end the war. Lincoln questioned whether emancipating the slaves would create a rift in the North that would see the secession of key border states and the complete destruction of the Union.

Todd Brewster puts this six month time period within the context of the mid-19th century world. He does this in three key areas; the colonization of blacks and racial differentiation, Lincoln’s Calvinist beliefs, and most extensively in the war strategies of George McClellan and Ambrose Burnside, along with the code of warfare produced by Francis Lieber. What can be seen as tangents not related to the main narrative at first glance, Brewster ties these mid-19th century philosophies back to Lincoln and the Emancipation Proclamation, further showing the reader that slavery had no certain end and that the signing of the document

was a difficult decision that is not as simple as it appears a century and half later. Where Brewster could have improved his narrative is in the Emancipation Proclamation's impact on the final three years of the war. He briefly touches on the Civil War turning into a war against Southern Society, Lincoln's eventual embrace that the end of slavery was now a mission of the war, and the change from the Civil War being a "gentleman's war" to a "total war," but this section seemed rushed in the final chapter. Perhaps a second work on the impact of the Emancipation Proclamation would be a great follow-up. Overall "Lincoln's Gamble" reads like a novel and is very manageable for the casual reader of history, but it also has the argument and more abstract concepts for the professional historian.

Frank Brennan says

This is THE best treatment of this subject I have ever read. Period. I consider myself pretty conversant in the Civil War and there are innumerable facets of the development of the Emancipation Proclamation that I was unaware of. I also was stunned at the level of ambivalence Lincoln had towards slavery -- especially his interest in encouraging free blacks to resettle in Central America or Africa. That is an element I don't think many recognize. Brewster work is highly readable and well documented. I suspect that 20% of the book is/are footnotes and acknowledgements. At the same time, it is vital to read the various drafts that the proclamation went through. I suspect most Americans believe Lincoln sat down at his desk and, like the Gettysburg Address, in one take. He did not -- and he received a ton of input from others. This is an incredibly important addition to Civil War literature. Put it in your library.

Miles Smith says

This is a short but entertaining episodic history of the Civil War during the last half of 1862. Bruce does an excellent job of showing how events affected Lincolns thinking and ultimately his decision making. I gave this book a higher rating because I think it does a service by not buying the nationalist narrative around Lincoln. It takes him at face value as a politician and also exposes his inconsistencies which were not a few. Brewster does this without falling into demonization. In short this is one of the few works on Lincoln and manages to be area digit without falling into hagiography. In short, one of the better Lincoln books I've read.

Raymond says

Todd Brewster's book was a very good account about how the Emancipation Proclamation evolved from an idea in the summer of 1862 to the directive that was issued on January 1, 1863. Brewster chronicles these six months so well. The book read like a political thriller. I felt as if I was in the different rooms when Lincoln debated on whether to even issue the proclamation and on the potential ramifications of his action. I really like this book because it broke down why issuing the proclamation was a big deal. I think many people today think that it was a simple decision but Lincoln actually struggled on whether he would issue it all the way until the day he did.

On a personal note, the magnitude of what the Emancipation Proclamation actually did finally hit me near the end of the book. We have always been taught that Lincoln freed the slaves, this concept is fixed in our brains. So much so that we forget the human element of this evil institution. Hundreds of thousands of slaves

were set free in the Confederate states and some of them may have been my ancestors. I don't know if my ancestors (many who I know by name because of my genealogy research) were freed by the Emancipation Proclamation but I do know they were able to gain their freedom by 1865 when the 13th Amendment was ratified. Who knows when slavery would have ended if the Emancipation Proclamation had not been signed. All I do know is that I will be forever grateful for the act that Lincoln did in 1863.

David says

This was a very interesting book about Lincoln's difficult decision to emancipate the slaves during the Civil War. I enjoyed the depth of research conducted and included in the book. At times, however, it seemed that some of the information included in the book was filler that was not directly connected to the proclamation. On the other hand, the information was interesting and added to my enjoyment of the book. I highly recommend this to anyone interested in the Civil War, President Lincoln or the Emancipation Proclamation.

Steve Smits says

Sometimes in the bargain bin of remainder books you can find some jewels. This short history and essay on Lincoln and the Emancipation Proclamation is really such a find. I had seen the September 1862 draft in Lincoln's handwriting on display at the local museum several years ago. This copy is held in the NY State Archives and was on a touring exhibition across the state. While I expected to breeze through the museum of our small town I found instead a line of viewers lasting over an hour. In the two day's on exhibit there were over seven thousand people who saw it.

Brewster takes us through Lincoln's thinking and aims in issuing the proclamation on January 1, 1863. He reminds us that Lincoln's views on inter-relationship of slavery, race and the rebellion were quite complex; the image held in history of Lincoln as "The Great Emancipator" grossly over simplifies his purposes in dealing with slavery. Lincoln was deeply opposed to slavery on moral grounds. Notwithstanding his personal views, he held that the Constitution did permit slavery. His longstanding political position on slavery was that banning the expansion of slavery beyond the fifteen states in which it existed was a proper act under the Constitution. As repugnant to him as slavery was, he held that slaves were "property" and the Constitution protected property owners from confiscation without due process. The war then was not against slavery; it was to preserve the union of states. It was to return the rebelling states under the aegis of the Constitution; the states had no legal right to sever themselves from the union.

Union generals had twice taken action to free slaves in territory under union military control. In both cases, Lincoln countermanded these decisions. He determined that it was only "military necessity" that could justify seizing property and that such necessity at those times did not exist. He was also quite concerned that such actions would alienate the four Border States who remained in the union despite being slave states.

Through mid 1862 the union's armies had been faring poorly. Lincoln began mulling over measures the government could take to pressure the South to abandon its rebellion and which could materially hurt its war-making resources. He struck upon the idea that the war powers provision of the Constitution gave him executive authority to seize property that was supporting the insurrectionists. Though there was a question whether this power was the executive's or the legislature's it could be reasonably argued that as commander-in-chief the president had such power. He shared a draft proclamation with his cabinet members. They

counseled him that it was unwise to issue such an order until the union armies gained a victory in the field. This showing came after the bloody battle of Antietam -- the bloodiest single day in the history of American wars -- when the union armies repelled Lee's invasion of Maryland. Shortly after, Lincoln announced his intention to issue the proclamation on January 1, 1863 and offered the rebel states the chance to return to the fold before then, thus preserving slavery.

It is critically important to note the distinction between Lincoln's personal moral views on slavery and his adherence to what he held to be the limits of legal authority under the Constitution. Brewster reminds us that Lincoln's actions were always grounded in his belief in the supremacy of the Constitution's prescriptions and proscriptions on government powers.

Brewster also points out that Lincoln was a racist. He thought it impossible for whites and blacks to ever live together harmoniously. He supported the idea that colonization of freed blacks to Africa or Central America was a preferred solution to the forecasted problems of race relations in the country. He clearly had no sense that blacks could rise to equal status in white society. The image arising after Lincoln's death of his beneficent feelings toward black people is the result of mythologizing the great man.

While describing the evolution of the emancipation decision Brewster also takes the reader on some interesting side excursions. His analysis of Lincoln's religiosity is well done. Lincoln claimed to be Christian although he belonged to no church and he had non doctrinaire views much like those of Jefferson. Despite his individualistic, iconoclastic thinking on God and the divinity of Christ, it seems that as the war went on his references to events as reflecting the will of God and his actions as manifestations of God's will began to increase. Brewster places this change starting around the time of his young son Willie's death, a devastating blow to the Lincoln's.

Another interesting digression describes the evolution of military strategy. It is thought that in the early years the military's leaders held to the ideas of Antoine-Henri Jomini, a disciple of Napoleon who considered the movements of armies in the field as more like moves on a chessboard where position and maneuvering rather than violent action predominated. This was a gentler approach to war making where the capture of place, e.g. Richmond, was more important than the destruction of the enemy's army. Lincoln's frustration with McClellan's over cautiousness derived from the latter's use of his forces in this context. Lincoln's chief-of-staff, Maj. General Henry Halleck – about whom, because he was a native of my hometown, I have studied and written – was a leading military scholar on Jominian theory. Lincoln delved deeply into military strategy and became insightful on the limitations of accepted principles. He and Halleck changed their views as the war progressed and it became increasingly destructive and boldly executed. Contrasts in how McClellan and Sherman handled their armies show this change most starkly.

The risks in Lincoln's gamble were three-fold. To the abolitionists the emancipation clearly could be held as a half measure. The slaves were declared free only where their freedom could not be immediately enforced, i.e. in the states in rebellion where union authority did not prevail; they were not to be freed in the Border States. (Lincoln asked the Congress to enact a compensation plan for slave owner's in these states, but it did not.) Regarding these states (Kentucky, Missouri, Delaware and Maryland) there was real worry that the prospect that slavery eventually would be abolished there too might drive them away from the union cause. The second concern was that support in the North, grounded on the idea that the war was a fight to preserve the union, would dissolve if the war aims were perceived to shift to the freeing of slaves. Many people in the North were indifferent to, or even opposed, to the idea that the eradication of slavery was important. Finally, there was the problem of what would be the status of freed slaves after the conflict concluded. If slaves were freed as a war measure on what legal basis could their new status be sustained after the war was over? (The recent movie telling the story of the passage of thirteenth amendment deals with this issue.)

We know now, of course, that Lincoln's gamble paid off. While the Emancipation Proclamation was narrowly drafted as a war power decision legal under the Constitution, it must have been exceedingly clear to everyone that slavery could not continue after the rebellion was put down.

Sarah says

Three things struck me about this book:

1. How incredibly racist everyone in the mid-19th century was.
2. How much more nuanced Lincoln was than anyone gives him credit for
3. How well the author does at describing Christianity.

I know the third is a minute point, especially given how little the book discusses Christianity. But when it does, Brewster does a masterful job of describing Christianity as actual Christians describe it, rather than how most historians and non-Christians describe it. He doesn't claim that Lincoln **was** a Christian, instead leaving that decision to God himself. As I listened, I thought to myself "either this guy is actually a follower of Jesus himself, or he's a really good researcher."

There seems to be little evidence to suggest that Brewster is a Christian, but plenty of evidence to suggest that he is a masterful researcher. This was a non-fiction historical book as one is meant to be...going off into contextual tangents that lasted just long enough to give interesting information without losing track of the narrative, covering a 6-month period in Lincoln's life where he wrestled with the Emancipation Proclamation.

I listened to the audiobook, and I particularly enjoyed the author reading it. When possible, I like listening to authors read their own books, but Brewster's voice in particular is clear and engaging.

5/5 stars.

Andrea says

This book focuses on Lincoln's decision to write and eventually issue the Emancipation Proclamation. Brewster outlines the competing concerns Lincoln had to consider and also examines evidence for Lincoln's motives and attitudes. Definitely more interesting if you have a little background on the period.
