

LINCOLN LORE

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THE LINCOLN \$64,000 QUESTION

Losers seldom make the headlines but Robert E. Bennett of Kingsland, Ga. who missed the \$64,000 Lincoln question on a popular television program is an exception. According to a well publicized story, he felt the question put to him was "irrelevant" and "not pertinent."

The query related to Lincoln's plan for a compensated emancipation and inquired how much per capita the President suggested should be allowed for emancipated slaves based on the 1860 census. Mr. Bennett proposed \$2,000 and his associate Lincoln expert, Ralph G. Newman of Chicago, revised the figure to \$1,600. The correct answer was \$400. It is doubtful if any project advanced by Abraham Lincoln during his entire administration with the exception of the Emancipation Proclamation itself, was more exclusively Lincoln's own creation than this appeal for compensated emancipation which Mr. Bennett called "irrelevant" and "not pertinent."

Abraham Lincoln on March 6, 1862 prepared a memorandum to be put in the form of a joint resolution by Congress setting forth the proposal for compensated emancipation which he hoped would be substantially as follows:

"Resolved that the United States ought to cooperate with any state which may adopt gradual abolishment of slavery giving to such state pecuniary aid, to be used by such state in its discretion, to compensate for the inconveniences public and private produced by such a change of system. . . . In full view of my great responsibility to my God, and to my country, I earnestly beg the attention of Congress and the people to the subject."

Lincoln in his argument in favor of the plan for compensated emancipation states: "In the mere financial or pecuniary view, any member of Congress with the census tables and Treasury report before him, can readily see for himself how very soon the current expenditures of this war would purchase at fair valuation, all the slaves in any named state."

Three days later the President wrote to Hon. Henry J. Raymond of the *New York Times* about the "kind notices of the late special Message to Congress" and then made this interesting observation: "Have you noticed the facts that less than one half-day's cost of this war would pay for all the slaves in Delaware, at four hundred dollars per head? . . ."

Five days after the Raymond letter on March 14, 1862 Lincoln wrote to Hon. James A. McDougal, Democratic senator from California, who opposed the compensated emancipation plan and later questioned the constitutionality of such procedure. Excerpts from Lincoln's letter to the senator follows:

"As to the expensiveness of the plan of gradual emancipation with compensation, proposed in the late Message, please allow me one or two brief suggestions.

"Less than one half-day's cost of this war would pay for all the slaves in Delaware at four hundred dollars per head.

"Thus all the slaves in Delaware by the census of 1860 are 1798, Cost of slaves at \$400—\$719,200. One day's cost of the war \$2,000,000."

The above letter was used as a basis for part of the \$64,000 question incorrectly answered by Bennett and Newman. In this case, as in the Raymond letter the proposed figure for slaves to be emancipated was \$400 per capita.

On July 14 of the same year, 1862, Lincoln continued

to press Congress for some action on a compensated emancipation bill, concluding: "The passage of which substantially as presented, I respectfully, and earnestly recommend."

In the presentation of the memorandum on March 2, 1862 and this one on July 14 he leaves blank the amount per capita at which the slave should be valued, allowing Congress to fill in this amount.

Lincoln's annual message to Congress delivered on December 1, 1862 further stresses the wisdom of the compensated emancipation plan and more attention is given to it than any other subject discussed. He urges the adoption because "the proposed emancipation would shorten the war, perpetuate peace, insure this increase of population, and proportionately the wealth of the country." How deeply interested he was in this method of saving the union through compensated emancipation may be observed in this appeal to Congress:

"Fellow-citizens, we cannot escape history. We of this Congress and this administration, will be remembered in spite of ourselves. No personal significance, or insignificance, can spare one or another of us. The fiery trial through which we pass, will light us down, in honor or dishonor, to the latest generation. We say we are for the Union. The world will not forget that we say this. We know how to save the Union. The world knows we do know how to save it. We—even we here—hold the power, and bear the responsibility. In giving freedom to the slave, we assure freedom to the free—honorable alike in what we give, and what we preserve. We shall nobly save, or meanly lose, the last best, hope of earth. Other means may succeed; this could not fail. The way is plain, peaceful, generous, just—a way which, if followed, the world will forever applaud, and God must forever bless."

James R. Gilmore reported a conversation with Lincoln in May 1863 in which he quotes Lincoln as saying that at the close of the war: "I should be disposed to make compensation for the slaves, but I doubt if my cabinet or the country would favor that."

One of Lincoln's most famous letters was written to James G. Conkling on August 26, 1863 and here also he recalls: "I suggested compensated emancipation: to which you replied you wished not to be taxed to buy negroes. But I had not asked you to be taxed to buy negroes, except in such a way, as to save you from greater taxation to save the Union exclusively by other means."

It is well known to every Lincoln student that on February 5, 1865 Lincoln brought before his cabinet a revised program for compensating the southern states for their economical losses by payment of the sum of "four hundred million dollars . . . to be distributed among said States *pro rata* on their respective slave populations, as shown by the census of 1860; and no part of said sum to be paid unless all resistance to the national authority shall be abandoned and cease."

The President wrote on the back of this recommendation an endorsement that must have registered one of the greatest disappointments of his entire administration. He noted: "Feb. 5, 1865. Today these papers, which explain themselves, were drawn up and submitted to the Cabinet and unanimously disapproved by them."

Certainly Lincoln himself did not feel that his relation to the subject of compensated emancipation or any of its component parts was "irrelevant" or "not pertinent" in his personal direction of the affairs of the nation.