To many readers the title of this article may seem whimsical if not obscure. "Lincoln a hedgehog?!" remarked the baffled president of the Abraham Lincoln Association when he first heard the proposed title. Lincoln himself might have appreciated the analogy—given his penchant for animal metaphors and his fondness for Aesop's Fables. This particular analogy might at first glance appear to be unflattering, though; the Encyclopaedia Britannica says of the hedgehog that "the brain is remarkable for its low development." Like its larger American cousin the porcupine, the hedgehog's distinguishing characteristic is self-defense by its sharp spines, or quills.

But the notion of comparing Lincoln to a hedgehog was suggested by a line from the Greek poet Archilochus: "The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing." Classical scholars have disagreed about the purport of this adage. It may mean nothing more than that the fox, despite his cleverness, cannot overcome the hedgehog's one defense. But in a famous essay on Leo Tolstoy with the similar title of "The Hedgehog and the Fox," the British philosopher Isaiah Berlin has provided a more profound rendering of Archilochus' words. The hedgehog is a thinker or leader who "relate[s] everything to a single central vision... a single, universal, organizing principle," writes Berlin, while the fox "pursue[s] many ends, often unrelated and even contradictory."1

In this sense, Abraham Lincoln can be considered one of the foremost hedgehogs in American history. More than any of his Civil War contemporaries, he pursued policies that were governed by a central vision, expressed in the Gettysburg Address, that this "nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal... shall not perish from the earth." Lincoln was surrounded by foxes who considered themselves smarter than he but who lacked his depth of vision and therefore sometimes pursued unrelated and contradictory ends. Two of the most prominent foxes were William H. Seward and Horace Greeley. Both were more clever than Lincoln, more nimble-witted and brilliant in conversation. They

shared Lincoln's nationalism and his abhorrence of slavery. But while Lincoln navigated by the lodestar that never moved, Seward and Greeley steered by stars that constantly changed position. If they had been at the helm instead of Lincoln, it is quite likely that the United States would have foundered on the rocks of disunion.

Several of Lincoln's associates testified to the slow but tenacious qualities of his mind. Greeley himself noted that Lincoln's intellect worked "not quickly nor brilliantly, but exhaustively." A fellow lawyer in antebellum years said that in analyzing a case, writing a letter, preparing a speech, or making a decision Lincoln was "slow, calculating, methodical, and accurate." The volatile William Herndon sometimes showed impatience with his partner's deliberate manner of researching or arguing a case, but conceded that while Lincoln "thought slowly and acted slowly," he "not only went to the root of the question, but dug up the root, and separated and analyzed every fibre of it." In a legal case or a political debate, recalled Leonard Swett, Lincoln would concede nonessential points to his opponent, lulling him into a false sense of complacency. "But giving away six points and carrying the seventh he carried his case...the whole case hanging on the seventh...Any man who took Lincoln for a simple-minded man would wind up with his back in a ditch." 3

During the war Lincoln expressed this hedgehog philosophy of concentrating on the one big thing, to the exclusion of nonessentials, in a speech to an Ohio regiment. "No small matter should divert us from our great purpose...[Do not] let your minds be carried off from the great work we have before us." 4 Herndon told a story that illustrated Lincoln's remarkable capacity to focus on what he considered the essentials of any matter. Herndon visited Niagara Falls some time after Lincoln had seen the falls in 1849. Telling Lincoln his impressions of this wonder of nature, Herndon waxed eloquent in typical nineteenth-century romantic fashion, declaring of rush and roar and brilliant rainbows. Exhausting his adjectives, he asked Lincoln what had made the deepest impression on him.


when he saw the falls. "The thing that struck me most forcibly," Lincoln replied, "was, where in the world did all that water come from?" Herndon recalled this remark after nearly forty years as an example of how Lincoln "looked at everything. . . . His mind, heedless of beauty or awe, followed irresistibly back to the first cause. . . . If there was any secret in his power this surely was it."

The "first cause," the central vision that guided Lincoln the hedgehog, was preservation of the United States and its constitutional government, which he was convinced would be destroyed if the Confederate States established their independence. Lincoln's nationalism was profound. It was not merely chauvinism, not the spread-eagle jingoism typical of American oratory in the nineteenth century. It was rooted in the Declaration of Independence and the ideals of liberty and equal opportunity that the Declaration had implanted as a revolutionary new idea on which the United States was founded. One of the first books he had read as a boy, Lincoln told the New Jersey senate in Trenton on February 21, 1861, was Parson Weem's Life of Washington. Nothing in that book fixed itself more vividly in his mind than the story of the Revolutionary army crossing the ice-choked Delaware River in a driving sleet storm on Christmas night 1776, at a low point in the American cause, to attack the British garrison at Trenton. "I recollect thinking then, boy even though I was, that there must have been something more than common that those men struggled for . . . something even more than National Independence . . . something that held out a great promise to all the people of the world for all time to come." This it was, said Lincoln next day at Independence Hall in Philadelphia, "which gave promise that in due time the weights should be lifted from the shoulders of all men, and that all should have an equal chance."

On the eve of taking the oath as president of a nation that seemed to be breaking apart, Lincoln was "exceedingly anxious that this Union, the Constitution, and the liberties of the people shall be perpetuated in accordance with the original idea for which that struggle was made." Three weeks after calling out the militia to suppress the insurrection that began at Fort Sumter, Lincoln told his private secretary John Hay that "the central idea pervading this struggle" was the necessity "of proving that popular government is not an absurdity." If in a free government "the minority have the

right to break up the government whenever they choose," it would "go far to prove the incapability of the people to govern themselves." On July 4, 1861, Lincoln said that "our popular government has often been called an experiment." Confederate success would destroy that experiment, warned Lincoln on this and other occasions, would seal the doom of that "last best, hope" for "maintaining in the world . . . government of the people, by the people, for the people." "

This was the fixed and unmoving North Star by which Lincoln charted his course through the Civil War when foxes seemed to navigate by the revolving planets. During the secession winter of 1860-61, several Republican spokesmen, fearing another proslavery compromise to keep slave states in the Union, expressed a preference for letting them go in peace. "If the Cotton States shall become satisfied that they can do better out of the Union than in it, we insist on letting them go," wrote Horace Greeley in his powerful *New York Tribune.* "We hope never to live in a republic whereof one section is pinned to the residue by bayonets." Whether Greeley really meant this, or hedged it around with so many qualifications and reservations as to make it meaningless, has been the subject of debate among historians. Whatever the mercurial Greeley meant, many of his contemporaries including Lincoln seem to have read his Go-in-Peace editorials literally. Lincoln complained of the Tribune's "damaging vagaries about peaceable secession." Greeley wrote to the president-elect in December 1860 that what he most feared was "another disgraceful back-down of the Free States. Let the Union slide—it may be reconstructed. . . . But another nasty compromise, whereby everything is conceded and nothing secured, will so thoroughly disgrace and humiliate us that we can never raise our heads."

"Let the Union slide—it may be reconstructed" is the language of the fox. Lincoln the hedgehog knew better. Once the principle of secession was recognized, the Union could never be restored. The United States would cease to exist. The next time a disaffected

minority lost a presidential election, it would invoke the precedent of 1860 and go out of the Union. Monarchists and reactionaries throughout the world would rejoice in the fulfillment of their prediction that this upstart democracy in North America could not last. Lincoln’s refusal to sanction disunion or compromise eventually brought Greeley around to the same position. In the process, though, Lincoln the hedgehog had to bristle his spines against an even wilier fox than Greeley.

William H. Seward had not fully accepted his eclipse as leader of the Republican party by Lincoln’s nomination and election as president. Seward not only aspired to be the “premier” of the Lincoln administration, but he also emerged as the foremost Republican advocate of conciliation toward the South during the secession winter. Seward’s “Higher Law” and “Irrepressible Conflict” speeches had made him the South’s bête noire during the 1850s. But in January 1861 he wrote to Lincoln that “every thought that we think ought to be conciliatory, forbearing and patient” toward the South. Lincoln was willing to go along part way with this advice. But Seward flirted with the idea of supporting the Crittenden Compromise, whose centerpiece was an extension of the Missouri Compromise line of 36° 30’ between slavery and freedom to all present and future territories. This would have been a repudiation of the platform on which the Republicans had stood from the beginning, and on which they had just won the election.

Lincoln could not countenance this. “Entertain no proposition for a compromise in regard to the extension of slavery,” he wrote to key Republican leaders including Seward. Crittenden’s compromise “would lose us everything we gained by the election. . . . Filibustering for all South of us, and making slave states would follow. . . . to put us again on the high-road to a slave empire.” The proposal for Republican territorial concessions, Lincoln pointed out, “acknowledges that slavery has equal rights with liberty, and surrenders all we have contended for. . . . We have just carried an election on principles fairly stated to the people. Now we are told in advance, the government shall be broken up, unless we surrender to those we have beaten. . . . If we surrender, it is the end of us. They will repeat the experiment upon us ad libitum. A year will not pass, till we shall have to take Cuba as a condition upon which they will stay in the Union.”

Lincoln's firmness stiffened Seward's backbone, but it did not end his desire to dominate the administration. The next contest between this fox and the hedgehog occurred over the issue of Fort Sumter. As Seward's biographer Glyndon Van Deusen puts it, during the Sumter crisis "Seward's mind moved restlessly from one possibility to another." He emerged as leader of a faction that wanted to withdraw Union troops from the fort and yield it to the Confederacy. He hoped that this would reassure Southern Unionists of the government's peaceful intent, thereby keeping the upper South in the Union and cooling passions in the lower South.

Most of the cabinet and General-in-Chief Winfield Scott seemed at first to concur with this policy. Only Postmaster-General Montgomery Blair shared Lincoln's conviction that to give up Sumter would constitute a recognition of Confederate legitimacy and thus concede the principles of Unionism and national sovereignty. With the help of Blair's brother-in-law Gustavus Fox, Lincoln devised a

plan to resupply the garrison at Sumter to put the onus of starting
a war on the Confederacy if Southern artillery tried to stop the supply
ships.

When Seward learned of this, he panicked. On his own authority
he had clandestinely assured Confederate commissioners that Sum-
ter would be evacuated. Now all his foxy maneuvers would be
exposed as deceitful if not worse. In apparent desperation he sent
to Lincoln his April Fool’s Day memorandum. But Seward meant it
seriously. It was a perfect illustration of Isaiah Berlin’s definition of
the fox as one whose thought is “scattered or diffused, moving on
many levels.” Contending that the administration lacked a “policy”
to deal with secession, Seward suggested one and offered to carry
it out in his self-assumed role as premier of the administration. He
would give up Fort Sumter but reinforce the other principal Southern
fort in Union possession, Fort Pickens guarding Pensacola Harbor.
This, said Seward mysteriously, would “change the question before
the Public from one upon Slavery, or about Slavery for a question upon
Union and Disunion.” (Seward had convinced himself that only anti-
slavery Republicans wanted to hold Sumter, while all factions in the
North wanted to hold the less controversial and more easily rein-
forced Pickens as a symbol of national sovereignty.) Seward then
proposed to provoke a war with Spain or France by demanding
explanations from them for their interventionist policies in Santo
Domingo and Mexico. This presumably would reunite North and
South in a mutual crusade to enforce the Monroe Doctrine.14

What Lincoln thought privately of this bizarre memorandum from
his secretary of state is unknown. The President’s formal reply to
Seward was temperate but resolute, as befitted a hedgehog. He dis-
missed the suggestion of a foreign war by ignoring it. As for the
critical matter of the forts, Lincoln could “not perceive how the re-
inforcement of Fort Sumpter [sic] would be done on a slavery, or
party issue, while that of Fort Pickens would be on a more national,
and patriotic one.” He reminded Seward that the government did
have a “policy” on the forts, announced a month earlier in Lincoln’s
inaugural address: “to hold, occupy, and possess the property and
places belonging to the government.” That was still the policy; Lin-
coln was determined to carry it out even at the risk of war over
Sumter. And “if this must be done,” he concluded pointedly, “I must
do it.”15

15. Ibid., 316-17.
Like Lincoln’s courtroom adversary described by Leonard Swett, Seward had landed on his back in a ditch. And he knew it. He no longer had any illusions about who was to be the premier of this administration. Seward became one of Lincoln’s most loyal and trusted subordinates. Lincoln repaid that loyalty by protecting Seward against an attempt by Republican senators to force him from the cabinet in December 1862—another notable occasion when the hedgehog outwitted several foxes.

After April 1861 Horace Greeley became one of the most prominent men who played fox to Lincoln’s hedgehog. An early wartime instance of this occurred in the days after the Union defeat at Bull Run on July 21, 1861. In the weeks before this battle, the banner headlines “FORWARD TO RICHMOND” in Greeley’s *New York Tribune* had contributed to the pressure that prodded the army into what turned out to be a premature offensive. From a feeling of remorse, or panic, Greeley suffered something of a nervous breakdown after the battle. “This is my seventh sleepless night,” he began a letter to Lincoln on July 29. “On every brow sits sullen, black despair. . . .
the Union is irrevocably gone, an armistice for thirty, sixty, ninety, one hundred and twenty days—better still for a year—ought at once to be proposed, with a view to a peaceful adjustment. . . . If it is better for the country and for mankind that we make peace with the rebels at once, and on their own terms, do not shrink even from that.”

Lincoln too endured some sleepless nights after Bull Run, but he did not deviate a hair’s breadth from his central vision of preserving the Union by winning the war. Lincoln’s secretary John Nicolay wrote two days after the battle that “the fat is in the fire now. . . . Preparations for the war will be continued with increased vigor by the government.” While Greeley was writing in despair to Lincoln, the President was outlining military strategy in a pair of memoranda which called for intensifying the blockade, increasing the army, and pushing forward offensives in Virginia and Tennessee. In essence, this remained Lincoln’s determined policy until Appomattox, through victory and defeat and frustration with incompetent or irresolute military commanders. It was a policy sustained by the spirit manifested in a letter Lincoln wrote during the Seven Days battles in 1862, another Union defeat that plunged many Northerners into a despondency that matched Greeley’s a year earlier. “I expect to maintain this contest,” declared Lincoln, “until successful, or till I die, or am conquered, or my term expires, or Congress or the country forsakes me.”

By 1864 this meant prosecuting the war until Confederate forces surrendered unconditionally. But by midsummer of that year the prospects of accomplishing this goal seemed bleak. The two principal Union armies had suffered nearly a hundred thousand casualties without fulfilling the high hopes of spring that Richmond and Atlanta would fall and the war end by the Fourth of July. War weariness and a desire for peace—perhaps even peace at any price—crept over the North. “Who shall revive the withered hopes that bloomed at the opening of Grant’s campaign?” asked the New York World in July. “Patriotism is played out,” declared another Democratic newspaper. “All are tired of this damnable tragedy.” In the middle of his campaign for reelection, it appeared that Lincoln would lose to a Democrat running on a peace platform. In August, Lincoln himself

16. Lincoln Papers.
18. Ibid., 5:292.
fully expected to lose. Other Republicans were equally pessimistic. “Lincoln’s reelection is an impossibility” unless he can bring peace or victory, wrote Seward’s alter ego Thurlow Weed. “The people are wild for peace.”

During this grave crisis—perhaps the gravest of Lincoln’s presidency—Horace Greeley set in motion a peace overture that once more contrasted Lincoln’s steady focus on the one big thing with Greeley’s mercurial wavering. Learning of the presence of Confederate agents at Niagara Falls, Canada, Greeley wrote Lincoln urging him to explore with them the possibility of peace negotiations. “Our bleeding, bankrupt, almost dying country also longs for peace—shudders at the prospect of fresh conscriptions, wholesale devastations, and of new rivers of human blood.” Seeing an opportunity to use Greeley to expose the impossibility of securing peace by negotiations except on Confederate terms, Lincoln immediately authorized him to bring to Washington under safe conduct “any person anywhere professing to have any proposition of Jefferson Davis in writing, for peace, embracing the restoration of the Union and the abandonment of slavery.”

Of course no such person existed, and Lincoln knew it. There followed a comic-opera scenario in which Greeley tried to wriggle out of responsibility for carrying through the initiative he had set in motion while Lincoln pressed him to go forward. Reluctantly Greeley did so, eliciting just what Lincoln expected and wanted—public statements from Confederate leaders that they would negotiate no peace that did not include independence. An embarrassed Greeley squirmed and twisted, trying to shift the blame to Lincoln in a private letter that condemned the President’s strategy of unconditional surrender as a “fatuity.” “No truce! No armistice! No negotiation! No mediation! Nothing but surrender at discretion!” Greeley exclaimed. “There is nothing like it in history. It must result in disaster, or all experience is delusive.” Never mind that this had been pretty much the policy advocated by the Tribune during the three years between Greeley’s crises of confidence in July 1861 and July 1864. Greeley now believed that “no Government fighting a rebellion should ever close its ears to any proposition the rebels may make.”

22. Greeley to Lincoln, 8 Aug. 1864, Abraham Lincoln Papers. For a discussion of this episode, see Horner, Lincoln and Greeley, 296-323.
But Lincoln had a firmer grip on reality. He pointed out in his annual message to Congress on December 6, 1864, that Jefferson Davis had repeatedly made it clear that his terms for peace were independence and nothing less. "He does not attempt to deceive us," said Lincoln. "He affords us no excuse to deceive ourselves. He cannot voluntarily reaccept the Union; we cannot voluntarily yield it. Between him and us the issue is distinct, simple, and inflexible. It is an issue that can only be tried by war, and decided by victory."23 When Lincoln said this; of course, military fortunes had turned decisively in favor of Union victory. But that only vindicated the steadfast sagacity of Lincoln's refusal to give in to despair and defeatism during the dark days of the previous summer.

The peace-negotiations exchange between Lincoln and Greeley involved the issue of slavery as well as of Union. Clever disinformation tactics by Confederate agents and northern Peace Democrats had spread the notion that only Lincoln's insistence on emancipation

as a prior condition of negotiations prevented peace. Greeley seems to have bought this line, at least temporarily. "We do not contend," he wrote in the Tribune on July 25, "the reunion is possible or endurable only on the basis of Universal Freedom . . . War has its exigencies which cannot be foreseen . . . and Peace is often desirable on other terms than those of our choice." If this meant anything, it meant that Greeley was willing to drop emancipation as a condition. Although the pressure on Lincoln from even staunch Republicans to do the same became so intense that the President almost caved in, he ultimately stood fast. He denied that he was "now carrying on this war for the sole purpose of abolition. It is & will be carried on so long as I am President for the sole purpose of restoring the Union. But no human power can subdue this rebellion without using the Emancipation lever as I have done." The Emancipation Proclamation was a solemn promise. To break it in a chimerical quest for peace would be "a cruel and astounding breach of faith" for which "I should be damned in time & eternity . . . The world shall know that I will keep my faith to friends & enemies, come what will."24

Greeley and Lincoln appeared to have switched sides since their exchange of public letters on emancipation two years earlier. On that occasion Greeley had castigated the President for his reluctance to adopt emancipation as a war policy. Lincoln had replied with the famous words: "My paramount object in this struggle is to save the Union, and is not either to save or to destroy slavery. If I could save the Union without freeing any slave I would do it, and if I could save it by freeing all the slaves I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone I would also do that."25 In 1864 Lincoln's critics were asking him to revert to the first or third of these alternatives — to free none or only some of the slaves — while he was now committed to the second one of freeing all, since he supported the Thirteenth Amendment, passed by the Senate and endorsed by the Republican platform on which he was running for reelection. There was no inconsistency between the Lincoln of 1862 and the Lincoln of 1864; on both occasions his paramount object was to save the Union, with emancipation as a potential "lever" to help do the job. In 1864 he was convinced that the lever was essential; in August 1862 he had also been convinced of this, although he was then waiting for a propitious time to announce it. It was Greeley, not Lincoln, who zig-zagged on slavery between 1862 and 1864.

24. Ibid., 7:51, 507.
25. Ibid., 5:388.
Yet there was an apparent contradiction in Lincoln’s position on slavery. To resolve that contradiction will go to the heart of the theme of Lincoln as hedgehog. Lincoln had always considered slavery “an unqualified evil to the negro, the white man, and the State;” a “monstrous injustice” that “deprives our republican example of its just influence in the world—enables the enemies of free institutions, with plausibility, to taunt us as hypocrites.”26 If anything had been the “single central vision” of his political career before 1861, it had been this. A study of Lincoln as a public speaker maintains that the 175 speeches he gave from 1854 to 1860 showed him to be a “one-issue man” whose “central message” was the necessity of excluding slavery from the territories as the first step toward putting the institution on the path to ultimate extinction.27

The Declaration of Independence was the foundation of Lincoln’s political philosophy. “I have never had a feeling politically that did not spring from the sentiments embodied in the Declaration,” he said in 1861. Lincoln insisted that the phrase “all men are created equal” applied to black people as well as to whites. This powered his conviction that the Founders had looked toward the ultimate extinction of slavery. That is why they did not mention the words *slave or slavery* in the Constitution. “Thus the thing is hid away, in the constitution,” said Lincoln in 1854, “just as an afflicted man hides away a wen or cancer, which he dares not cut out at once, lest he bleed to death; with the promise, nevertheless, that the cutting may begin at the end of a given time.”28

These were the principles that for Lincoln made America stand for something unique and important in the world; they were the principles that the heroes of the Revolution whom Lincoln revered had fought and died for; without these principles the United States would become just another oppressive autocracy. That is why the Kansas-Nebraska Act propelled Lincoln back into politics in 1854; that is what fueled the 175 speeches he gave during the next six years. The repeal of the Missouri Compromise restriction on slavery’s expansion seemed to legitimize the permanence of the institution; Stephen A. Douglas’s statement that he cared not whether slavery was voted down or up represented a despicable moral indifference; Douglas’s denial that blacks were included in the phrase “all men are created equal” was a lamentable declension from the faith of

the Founders. "Near eighty years ago we began by declaring that all men are created equal," said Lincoln at Peoria in 1854, "but now from that beginning we have run down to the other declaration, that for some men to enslave others is 'a sacred right of self-gov-
ernment.' . . . Our republican robe is soiled, and trailed in the dust. Let us repurify it. . . . Let us re-adopt the Declaration of Indepen-
dence, and with it, the practices, and policy, which harmonize with it. . . . If we do this, we shall not only have saved the Union; but we shall have saved it, as to make, and keep it, forever worthy of the saving." 29

In his famous "lost speech" at Bloomington, Illinois, in 1856, Lincoln said, according to the only contemporary summary of the speech, that "the Union must be preserved in the purity of its principles as well as in the integrity of its territorial parts. It must be 'Liberty and Union, now and forever, one and inseparable.' " Note that Lincoln here placed liberty first and Union second; the Union was a means to promote the greater end of liberty; it was the promise of liberty that made the Union meaningful. In his speech at Inde-
pendence Hall on Washington's Birthday 1861, Lincoln made the same point more dramatically. The principle of universal liberty in the Declaration of Independence, he told a cheering crowd, was what had kept the United States together for eighty-five years. "But, if this country cannot be saved without giving up that principle— I was about to say I would rather be assassinated on this spot than to surrender it." 30

Yet when Lincoln became president, he assured Southerners that he had no intention of interfering with slavery in their states. When the war broke out, he reassured loyal slaveholders on this score, and revoked orders by Union generals emancipating the slaves of Confederates in Missouri and in the South Atlantic states. This was a war for Union, not for liberty, said Lincoln over and over again— to Greeley in August 1862, for example: "If I could save the Union without freeing any slave I would do it." In a letter to his old friend Senator Orville Browning of Illinois on September 22, 1861—ironically, exactly one year before issuing the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation—Lincoln rebuked Browning for his support of General

29. Ibid., 2:275-76.
30. Ibid., 2:341; 4:240. When Lincoln made this extemporaneous speech at In-
dependence Hall, he had already been warned of the plot in Baltimore to assassinate him as he passed through; this matter was obviously on his mind.
John C. Frémont’s order purporting to free the slaves of Confederates in Missouri. “You speak of it as being the only means of saving the government. On the contrary it is itself the surrender of government.” If left standing, it would drive the border slave states into the Confederacy. “These all against us, and the job on our hands is too large for us. We would as well consent to separation at once, including the surrender of this capitol.”31 To keep the border states—as well as Northern Democrats—in the coalition fighting to suppress the rebellion, Lincoln continued to resist antislavery pressures for an emancipation policy well into the second year of the war.

The Union—with or without slavery—had become the one big thing, the “single central vision” of Lincoln the hedgehog. What accounted for this apparent reversal of priorities from liberty first to Union first?—from Union as a means to promote liberty to Union as an end in itself? Primarily it was the responsibility of power, and Lincoln’s conception of constitutional limitations on that power. As president, Lincoln had taken an oath to preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution. This duty constrained his options. “I am naturally anti-slavery,” he said in an 1864 letter explaining these constraints. “If slavery is not wrong, nothing is wrong. . . . Yet I have never understood that the Presidency conferred upon me an unrestricted right to act officially on this judgment and feeling.” His oath of office “forbade me to practically indulge my primary abstract judgment on the moral question of slavery.” The Constitution protected slavery; Lincoln was sworn to protect the Constitution.32

But wars generate a radical momentum of their own. As Lincoln expressed it in the same letter: “I claim not to have controlled events, but confess plainly that events have controlled me.” By 1862 the limited conflict to suppress an insurrection had become a total war in which both sides were trying to mobilize all of their resources. It was becoming clear that the necessity of deferring to border-state and Democratic opinion on slavery was outweighed by the necessity to strike at one of the Confederacy’s principal resources—its labor force—and to avoid alienating antislavery Northerners, who provided the driving energy and commitment crucial to winning the war. Lincoln’s conception of the constitutional relationship between slavery and Union shifted during 1862. “My oath to preserve the constitution,” he explained two years later, “imposed upon me the

31. Ibid., 4:532.
32. Ibid., 7:281.
duty of preserving, by every indispensable means, that government—that nation—of which that constitution was the organic law." Lincoln decided in the summer of 1862 to use his war powers as commander in chief to seize enemy property employed to wage war against the United States; he proclaimed the emancipation of the principal form of that property as a "military necessity" to help win the war.

Lincoln used one of his favorite metaphors to illustrate the point. "By general law life and limb must be protected; yet often a limb must be amputated to save a life.... I felt that measures, otherwise unconstitutional, might become lawful, by becoming indispensable to the preservation of the constitution, through preservation of the nation." When he revoked Frémont's emancipation order in September 1861, he did not think the indispensable necessity to amputate that diseased limb of slavery had come. Nor had it come by May 1862, when Lincoln revoked a similar order by General David Hunter for the South Atlantic states. But in the dark days of defeat during the summer of 1862, the time came. "Driven to the alternative of either surrendering the Union, and with it, the Constitution, or of laying strong hand on the colored element[,] I chose the latter."33

The Emancipation Proclamation and its corollary, the enlistment of black troops, did help to win the war and preserve the nation. They were also, of course, crucial steps in the abolition of slavery. All of this is well known. Less often noted is another important fact about the Emancipation Proclamation: it also liberated Abraham Lincoln from the agonizing contradiction between his "oft-expressed personal wish that all men everywhere could be free" and his oath of office as president of a slaveholding republic.34 It fused the "organizing principle" of liberty that guided Lincoln before 1861 with the "single central vision" of Union that became his lodestar during the war. Liberty and Union became "the one big thing" instead of two big things, enabling Lincoln to become a true hedgehog. The "new birth of freedom" that he invoked at Gettysburg restored the Union to the role envisaged for it by the Founders: a means to achieve the end of liberty. And in hedgehog fashion, Lincoln expressed in his second inaugural address a steadfast determination to stick with his policy of total war to total victory even "if God wills that it continue, until all the wealth piled up the bond-man's

33. Ibid., 7:281-82.
two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash, shall be paid by another drawn with the sword.\footnote{35}

\footnote{35. Collected Works, 8:333.}