

My family went to the movies to see the much advertised and critically acclaimed new film by Steven Spielberg entitled “Lincoln”. The plot centered on one particular phase of the President’s legacy. That was the abolition of slavery and how he got it done. All of us were taught the Emancipation Proclamation was the vehicle that abolished slavery in America. That just is not true and Spielberg brilliantly showed us the real story. That’s right it was not the Emancipation Proclamation.

Wikipedia: “The Emancipation Proclamation is a military order issued to the Army and Navy of the United States by President Abraham Lincoln on January 1, 1863, during the American Civil War. It was based on the president’s constitutional authority as commander in chief of the armed forces; it was not a law passed by Congress. It proclaimed all slaves in Confederate territory to be forever free; that is, it ordered the Army to treat as free men the slaves in ten states that were still in rebellion, thus applying to 3.1 million of the 4 million slaves in the U.S.”

Lincoln knew that this was flimsy and would probably fall apart at the end of the war. The Confederacy certainly would use this as a condition of surrender (to keep slavery) and the American people were so weary of the war which terribly affected every household with death and misery. This was simply an Executive Order implemented under the War Powers Act. It didn’t even apply to non-Confederate states and the Confederate states paid no attention to it at all. What he needed was an amendment to the Constitution. Thus, he had his Republican Party sponsor the bill which would become the Thirteenth Amendment. This amendment would outlaw slavery within the United States forever.

Even though the abolition of slavery was part of the main platform of the new Republican Party it wasn’t going to be easy at all. An amendment to the Constitution must have two-thirds of the House votes to pass and go onto the President’s desk. The Republicans had a majority but were not even close to a two thirds majority. In addition, the Democratic Party was very much against the thought of slavery abolition. They certainly were going to dig in and try to defeat the amendment. The GOP needed 22 Democratic votes to pass the bill and so the plot thickens. Time was “ticking” as the amendment needed to be passed before the end of the war. Congress would be in no mood to stir up things again with a new initiative against slavery.

Lincoln and various GOP House leaders had to come up with a political scheme to rid America of slavery. Spielberg did more than clearly show how ugly politics can be. Lincoln, the Congressmen, Cabinet officials, General Grant, lobbyists, press, etc. were all involved in this ebb and flow struggle. Patronage jobs, earmarks, bribery, etc. were some of the “ammunition”

that was used in the persuasion of certain Democrats. “Honest Abe” was not totally honest in this struggle to make his dream a reality – the abolition of slavery. But he got the job done.

Most interesting was the role of a Black female who appeared with First Lady Mary Todd Lincoln just about all the time. When I returned home I researched this. This sister was not a slave or employee like a domestic. She was actually a very good friend of the First Lady and an entrepreneur and fashion designer. In fact, Elizabeth Keckley bought her own and her son's freedom in St. Louis and moved to Washington, DC. Her dresses were in high demand among the ladies of the Washington elite. Being a confidant of the First Lady made her well respected. Later, she would own boarding houses in Philadelphia and DC. She actually owned one across the street from the Willard Hotel and two blocks from the White House. She was also a philanthropist for Wilberforce University.

Chair of the House Ways and Means Committee was Thaddeus Stevens. He was a pure abolitionist and played his part in the victory. It was apparent that he had a relationship with a sister. I researched her and found Lydia Hamilton Smith, a widow and supposedly the housekeeper for the Congressman. Actually, it was well known that she was his common law wife for over 20 years. She ran his business affairs when he was in session. When Stevens died he left her \$5,000 which was a handsome sum back then. She bought his home and office and invested the rest in other things and became a prosperous entrepreneur in her own right.

Spielberg also noted that Blacks were on the battlefield in great numbers (unlike his denial in Band of Brothers series). In fact, over 200,000 Blacks served admirably. Go see this movie! You are going to love it.

Mr. Alford is the co-founder, President/CEO of the National Black Chamber of Commerce®. Website: www.nationalbcc.org . Email: halford@nationalbcc.org .