When President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation on Jan. 1, 1863, he was, in essence, issuing a promissory note on behalf of the United States. Payment on this promissory note was largely deferred until the mid-20th century. In his famous 1963 “I Have a Dream” speech, Martin Luther King, Jr., called that promise “a check which has come back marked ‘insufficient funds.’” Some would argue that even in 2004, there remains a balance due.

The initial significance of the document was largely symbolic. It freed slaves only in areas held by the Confederacy. Slaves in border states, or those whose owners had taken oaths of allegiance to the Union, were not affected. Its issuance seems to have been mainly strategic. It rallied Northern abolitionists, encouraged slaves in rebel areas to cooperate with Union forces, and improved the position of the United States abroad. But the Emancipation Proclamation did not put an end to slavery. Not until the Thirteenth Amendment was ratified in 1865 was slavery legally abolished in the United States.

While the end of the Civil War ended slavery, it did not bring legal and political equality to African Americans. In 1868 the Fourteenth Amendment, guaranteeing due process and equal protection of the laws, was added to the Constitution. This was followed by the Fifteenth Amendment in 1870, which stated that the right to vote should not be denied based on “race, color, or previous condition of servitude.” Yet, during the Reconstruction period, concern for the needs of newly freed slaves was overshadowed by other, competing interests, including the desire to resume trading patterns and economic relationships between the North and the South and the desire for political reconciliation.

Most plantations were restored to their prewar owners, and most former slaves were left without land, skills, or appropriate educational opportunities. The plantation system survived using the labor of sharecroppers rather than that of slaves. By the 1870s the North had tired of Reconstruction, agreeing in 1877 to remove federal troops from the former Confederate states. In return, Southern electors voted for Republican presidential candidate Rutherford B. Hayes, thus ending a deadlock in the Electoral College.

The end of Reconstruction saw further declines in the social, political, and legal status of African Americans. Freed from national constraints, Southern states imposed rigid systems of racial segregation. Certain restaurants, stores, hotels, public schools, seating sections on public transportation, restrooms, drinking fountains, and much more were labeled “whites only.” These Jim Crow laws were enforced by the states’ legal machinery and by private intimidation that was at best ignored, or at worst abetted, by local law enforcement.

By the mid-20th century, the civil rights movement began to emerge as a player on the national political stage. Civil rights groups used the complementary strategies of litigation and direct action to confront legal segregation and political inequality. Beginning in the early 20th century, the NAACP mounted court challenges to legally segregated facilities. At first these challenges used the “separate but equal” standard established by the U.S. Supreme Court in Plessy v. Ferguson (1896), arguing that the segregated facilities were not in fact equal. Finally, fifty years ago this spring, the U.S. Supreme Court overturned its earlier precedent and declared that for the purposes of the Fourteenth Amendment, separate facilities were inherently unequal.

Social change often lags behind legal change. Compliance with Brown v. Board of Education, which outlawed segregation in public schools in 1954, was minimal in the states of the former Confederacy. In the 1960s newer civil rights groups, such as the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the Congress of Racial Equality, and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, added direct-action techniques, including marches and acts of civil disobedience, to the struggle for civil rights. Responses from local authorities dramatized the brutality of the segregationists. Scenes of peaceful protesters being arrested and beaten were publicized by national media and helped to galvanize public opinion against Jim Crow. In 1964 Congress passed, and President Lyndon Johnson signed, the first comprehensive civil rights act since Reconstruction, the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The Voting Rights Act followed in 1965. Approximately 100 years after the Emancipation Proclamation, African Americans in the United States had finally gained political and legal equality.

The Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 will be on display at the University’s Museum of American Political Life from March 25 through March 28 as part of American Originals: Treasures from the National Archives. The entire exhibit, featuring some of the most important documents in U.S. history, may be seen through May 16. The exhibition has been created by the National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C., and the Foundation for the National Archives. United Technologies Corp. is the major underwriter of the American Originals exhibition in the Hartford area.

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Photos on facing page, clockwise from bottom left: Martin Luther King, Jr., “I Have a Dream” speech, 1963; Rosa Parks sitting in front in a Montgomery, Ala., bus; Harriet Tubman (far left) with escaped slaves during the Civil War; former slave “Drummer” Jackson, who served with the 79th U.S. Colored Troops in the Civil War; © Bettmann/CORBIS

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“I never, in my life, felt more certain that I was doing right than I do in signing this paper.”

—Abraham Lincoln, upon signing the Emancipation Proclamation

Abraham Lincoln, ca. 1860–65, from the Mathew Brady Collection, National Archives and Records Administration