Q95 – What did the Emancipation Proclamation do?

DOUGLAS GINSBURG, Federal Judge, U.S. Court of Appeals, D.C. Circuit:
The Emancipation Proclamation is one of our greatest documents. Issued during the Civil War, it freed slaves in most of the Confederacy. Yet, when announced, it was unenforceable.

The Proclamation freed slaves only in the states, or parts of states, in rebellion – not slaves in border states – nor in Confederate territory occupied by Union troops. The London Times mocked the president, “Where he has no power, Mr. Lincoln will set the negroes free. Where he retains power, he will consider them as slaves.”
Lincoln issued the Proclamation under his constitutional power as commander-in-chief. The Southern states viewed slaves as property. By liberating their property, and inviting freed slaves to join the Union Army, Lincoln weakened their power to wage war.
The Proclamation was a good deal bolder than critics acknowledged. Northerners were split on emancipation. Lincoln didn’t know if even the troops he commanded would accept the Proclamation. Some grumbled – but they did obey.
The ex-slave Frederick Douglass saw the moral force of the Proclamation. He wrote, “We shout for joy that we live to record this righteous decree.” As Union armies swept across the South, emancipation followed.
Two months before his death, Lincoln called the Emancipation Proclamation "my greatest and most enduring contribution to the history of the war. It is, in fact, the central act of my administration, and the great event of the 19th century."