



LINCOLN'S DILEMMA

INTRODUCTION: RECASTING AMERICA'S STRUGGLE FOR FREEDOM AND EQUALITY

Lincoln's Dilemma is a four-hour, four-part documentary series contributing to the ongoing work of history, memory, and the American national narrative. The series takes a forthright look at Lincoln's presidency, his legacy in the popular imagination, and the ways our nation continues to work towards the ideal of a more perfect union.

Lincoln's Dilemma: Recasting the Struggle for Freedom and Equality provides four companion lessons created for the docu-series. Each lesson engages middle and high school students in a rigorous re-examination of American history through a careful look at the people, places, and events surrounding the Civil War, the work of abolitionists, and the emancipation of enslaved people. Using clips from the docu-series, extensive interviews with present-day scholars, and primary source materials specific to each episode, students will set aside their preconceptions and explore anew how President Lincoln and his administration contended with the issues of his day — a violently corrosive political environment, the threat to the cohesion of the union, and deeply institutionalized racism — and compare them to those in our current climate. Students will explore the relationship between history and the construction of national narratives and the important work of redress that we, as individuals and as a nation, can re-dedicate ourselves to as we work towards racial healing and justice.

OUTLINE

Lesson One: Becoming an Anti-Slavery Politician

Students will articulate Lincoln's anti-slavery position using the film and interview archives.

Lesson Two: From Anti-Slavery to Abolition

Students will examine the events that impacted Lincoln's evolving thinking on slavery before and throughout the Civil War and analyze the purpose and limitations of the Emancipation Proclamation

Lesson Three: Challenging the Myth of the "Great Emancipator"

Students will compare and contrast multiple historians' perspectives on Lincoln's leadership and position on slavery as well as the effect of abolitionists and enslaved people on the evolution of his thinking

Lesson Four + Final Project: Lincoln's Relevance Today

Students will reflect upon Lincoln's presidency, its legacy, and what it has come to represent today

Each lesson will include:

- Essential Questions and Lesson Objectives
- Film Clips from *Lincoln's Dilemma*
- Interview Threads: Interviews with historians edited together to deepen the lesson topic
- Resource Materials
- *Lincoln's Dilemma* Learning Log



Illustration by Studio AKA



“Lincoln is a human being like the rest of us. He was not perfect, not at all, but he was able to accomplish some things that someone who was less great or with less ambition or with less skill would not have been successful at. He was the right person at the right time for the nation and for African Americans, too. I don’t give him credit for everything that happened with African Americans during this period, because we did a lot of it ourselves as well — but I do give him part.”

EDNA GREENE MEDFORD, PROFESSOR AND HISTORIAN, HOWARD UNIVERSITY



OVERVIEW



***Lincoln's Dilemma: Recasting the Struggle for Freedom and Equality* stands apart from other humanities curricula focusing on this era in several ways:**

Educators and students will learn from a deep and diverse well of contemporary historical scholars each offering their critique of existing historical narratives from this era of American history. Studying this research and analyzing select source materials relevant to the lesson topics, students will practice and reflect on the process of revising and correcting previously incorrect or incomplete historical narratives.

For example, the prevailing narrative that President Lincoln “freed” enslaved people will be challenged and complicated as students learn that Lincoln’s position on slavery was not fixed, evolving over the course of his political career from Free-Soiler, to anti-slavery, to abolition—and, what’s more, enslaved people had always resisted their enslavement and were active agents in emancipating themselves.

This process of critique and correction is particularly relevant to our current times. As we see throughout *Lincoln's Dilemma*, the question of how to tell this part of our nation’s story is still very raw. Over the past decade the active removal, relocation, and renaming of public symbols and memorials across the nation has continued even more than 150 years after the last battle of the Civil War.¹ From the [Robert E. Lee statue](#) in Richmond to the push [to relocate the Freedmen’s Memorial](#) in Washington, D.C., the sites commemorating the Civil War reflect more about the people who built them and the narrative they wanted to tell and less about the events or people they are meant to represent.

Students can be full participants in this current conversation by thinking about how to reshape America’s public memory landscape in the future. At the end of each lesson students will complete a Learning Log, a running set of notes and ideas responding to the suggested guiding questions from the lesson, which they’ll use to complete the final project, ***America’s Struggle for Freedom and Equality*** – the plans for a site of public memory of their own devising. As explained in Lesson Four, students can use a variety of formats to share this project and inform their school and community of the need for this work.



The Context and Conduct of the Civil War

To assist educators and students in building background knowledge during their study of this era of U.S. history, here are several resources to keep in mind:

- Library of Congress: [The Civil War in America](#)
- Lessons from the Zinn Education Project: [‘If There Is No Struggle...’: Teaching a People’s History of the Abolition Movement?](#)

¹<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/27/us/politics/lincoln-slave-statue-emancipation.html>



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Lesson Plans developed and written by [Blueshift Education](#)

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