JELANI COBB
LINCOLN'S DILEMMA
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

Jelani Cobb Interview
03-15-2021
Interviewed by Jackie Olive & Barak Goodman
Total Running Time: 00:57:04

START TC: 01:00:00:00

Lincoln's contradictions

00:00:19:00

JELANI COBB:

I think the reason why you have such contradictory takes on Lincoln is that one, he was the embodiment of highly contradictory times. And as a politician, he was trying to navigate the currents of really irreconcilable ideas. And if you add into that equation his own personal growth and development, and the fact that he's a politician who may or may not believe 100% of what he's saying in public at any given time, what you have is the makings of an enigma. You know, a person who is so layered and so complicated that if you try to summarize him in any single sentence, you're likely leaving out something that is equally important and completely the opposite, and also true about him. And so, I think that's one of the reasons why people have never tired of discussing Lincoln, even his critics. He's not the type of person like, you know, it's his successor, Andrew Johnson, whom history cast a verdict on, and he's rarely revisited. There's no real kind of question about, did we get Andrew Johnson wrong? But

with Lincoln, you know, even the people who don't like him can't stop talking about him. And I think that says something about who he was.

Lincoln's shifting views on emancipation and slavery

00:02:09:00

JELANI COBB:

The idea of Lincoln and slavery has been shot through by, I think, the emotional and cultural needs of the generations that have come after him. And there's been a need for a redemptive vision of how the country handled slavery. And so, in focusing on Lincoln as the grand emancipator, it allowed the United States – and, more specifically, it allowed white people – to emphasize the way that slavery ended without thinking about the ways in which slavery was created in this country and the ways in which it endured. And so with that kind of political weight on Lincoln's shoulders, it's hard to actually get a clear understanding about what he thought about slavery. First, we know that in his early career, in his time in the legislature and in his time in Congress, it was not an issue that consumed him. You know, he was not known, he was not distinguished as a Whig. And the Whig party was a kind of complicated undertaking. They had Whigs who were pro-slavery, Whigs who were anti-slavery, Whigs who were kind of all over the map as it stood on the issue. And Lincoln didn't really distinguish himself on it.

JELANI COBB:

The first time we see him really taking a visible stand around the issue is after 1854, when the Kansas-Nebraska Act is being debated. And it really polarizes people. And the people who had been able to co-exist with the institution of

slavery, even if they disagreed with it, the prospect of slavery being open, and the spread of the institution to more states where it didn't exist already, just really was something that people couldn't reconcile themselves with. And Lincoln, making the decision to re-enter politics, and challenge Stephen Douglas for the 1858 election to the United States Senate.

JELANI COBB:

And so that's where we see him come into this question. Also, not entirely unrelated, it's where the Republican party gets its start. You know, the 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act really obliterates the Whigs as a political party, and the Republicans arise as a consequence of it. And so there's Lincoln there, the Lincoln Douglas debates. You know, they famously go around the state seven times … Excuse me, not around the state seven times. But they famously go around the state and hold seven debates. And really at issue is the expansion of slavery, the possibility of expansion of slavery, but really more fundamentally, the possibility of Black citizenship. And so, Lincoln is arguing to the counter of Stephen Douglas, who is the author of that 1854 Kansas-Nebraska bill. And so we kind to see him being cast as the foil to Stephen Douglas and therefore the foil to the expansion of slavery in 1858. As president, Lincoln's positions on slavery are complicated, you know, because he has a personal disdain for the institution. He also believes that his highest calling and responsibility is the preservation of the Union.

JELANI COBB:

And so early on, when the question of emancipating enslaved Black people comes up, he is opposed to this, and of course in the Civil War, and it's Congress that moves first. You know, the Confiscation Acts, the first and second Confiscation Acts are ahead of Abraham Lincoln. And the Confiscation Acts essentially make it that if a person is in a place that is in the possession of the

Union army, they can be treated as any other kind of war material that would be seized. And it doesn't deal with the moral implications or the human implications of these being people who have rights. But it does deal with the kind of textbook, granular, technical aspect of whether or not these people can be emancipated during the course of the war.

01:07:01:00

JELANI COBB:

And even then, when Lincoln issues the Emancipation Proclamation, it's really shot through with the politics of war, which is not something I think you should be indicted for. You know, it was just kind of understanding that this is a politician dealing with reality. And so when he decides that they're going to issue an emancipation proclamation. And so all throughout the spring and summer of 1862, Lincoln waits until they have a large enough victory to make it seem like an emancipation proclamation is simply rubbing salt in the wound, not making a last minute kind of Hail Mary throw to disrupt the Confederacy. And he doesn't get that until Antietam in September of 1862 and issues the Emancipation Proclamation then.

Maryland and the Emancipation Proclamation

00:08:00:00

JELANI COBB:
With the Emancipation Proclamation, you kind of see the convergence of those two things, which is the politics of anti-slavery and the moral question of anti-slavery. There's a moment where those two interests converge, and that's why the Emancipation Proclamation, by the way, is written the way that it does.

JELANI COBB:

In issuing the Emancipation Proclamation, Lincoln says that any person held in slavery in an area that is in rebellion against the Union is free. And it's worded in this seemingly paradoxical way. Frederick Douglass has the most succinct criticism of it. He says that Lincoln has abolished slavery in the places where he had no power, and allowed slavery to remain in the places where he does, meaning the slave states that had sided with the Union. And, again, the political and strategic interests come into play here. One of the most obvious is the fact that Maryland is a slave state and that Maryland has sided with the Union, and Washington, D.C. sits between Maryland and Virginia. And any move that pushes Maryland further and leads people to be more sympathetic to the Confederacy, leaves open the possibility of the capital of the Union being surrounded by two Confederate states. And so, he doesn't touch slavery in Maryland. And so that's part of like what you see, like the evolution of Lincoln on the question and the issue of slavery is both personal, but also a reflection of the prerogatives, impossibilities of the war and the politics of the war. And so you really can't unbraid those things if you want to understand how Lincoln's perspective on slavery evolved and how slavery itself kind of came to its demise.

Frederick Douglass

00:10:18:00

JELANI COBB:
I still have not figured out Frederick Douglass, and I don't think any of us have. There have been some great efforts to, but I mean we know what he thought, we know what he wrote, but we don't understand how he came to exist. And what I mean by that is Lincoln was a man who had humble origins, who, you know, matriculated through the society, became a lawyer, became a Congressman. By the time Lincoln steps to the public podium, he's had a chance to engage and to learn and to become as fine a thinker as he ultimately was. Frederick Douglass

stole his literacy under actively hostile circumstances and taught himself to read.

JELANI COBB:

And not only for him, for Frederick Douglass to be in the position he was in, for him to have mastered the rudiments of literacy would have been an impressive accomplishment. He didn't do that. He became one of the finest writers of his era. One of the most eloquent speakers that the United States has produced. And not only a person who's capable of reading a newspaper, but a person capable of editing and writing for that newspaper. And so, he's really an embodiment of this idea that – people had said, "Oh well, you know, the Negro has an inferior intellectual capacity." But just by Douglass existing, he raised the question of whether the white men who were arguing against him could have written or thought as well as he did had they been born into slavery.

JELANI COBB:

They had the benefit of the finest teachers and the finest education that could be produced at that time. And here's Frederick Douglass with a stolen spelling book putting them to shame. I think that he's amazing in that regard and the fact that when we look at the kind of counterposing figures in the course of the war, you know, it's Douglass and Lincoln as these people who were summoned to be the voices of these titanic forces in American society, and Douglass is every bit the equal of the president of the United States, with none of the benefits, none of the advantages, none of the resources that would go into producing a world caliber statesman.

JELANI COBB:

One of the other things about Frederick Douglass that I think stands out is in the images of him, you know, he was one of the most photographed Americans of

that era. But he has this dignified bearing that carries him through. You see young Frederick Douglass and you see much older Frederick Douglass, same person, he looks stately in every image that we see of him. And in some ways it's also a kind of triumph because this is a person who knew what it was like to be a slave.

JELANI COBB:

And at least the visual record that we have of him doesn't convey that at all. And so, he's this kind of regal looking figure, square jaw, the famous Frederick Douglass part, stern, a serious visage, but a handsome man and immediately a person who you think, ‘this is a person of great consequence.’

00:14:48:00

JELANI COBB:

If Frederick Douglass was in front of me, I would want to know where he developed or derived his sense of possibility. What made him believe that change, on the grand scale that he was talking about, was actually possible? Because looking at his background, there's every reason for pessimism and skepticism. And I think it's more of a kind of, not a kind of historical question, not a political question, I think more of a spiritual and personal question about how he developed the sense that these abject, seemingly immovable circumstances could fall and that something better could eventually arise in its place.

Black female abolitionists

00:16:02:00

JELANI COBB:

When you talk about Black women abolitionists, first, there's the double burden of being Black and being female in a society in which both of those things were

the opposite. Both of those things disqualified you from being able to be a part of the public interest, or to speak in the public square, or to weigh in on the events of the day. And that's just the kind of beginning of it.

JELANI COBB:

Then, often, these are women who have endured the unique burdens of enslavement that women faced. And so, if you read Harriett Jacobs and her autobiography, she talks about something that is, again, one of the parts of slavery that we're least willing to confront, which is sexual exploitation and rape. And you know, her hiding in a cubby, essentially, for years until she had her opportunity to flee to freedom, and to do that, and then be willing to write about that, to tell that story as a means of indicting the system, in a way that only women could have, because the various arguments that were being advanced in defense of slavery, all rested upon this idea that it was this educational institution, or that these were familial relationships.

JELANI COBB:

And she's saying right there, what about the rape? Explain that. Explain that part of the institution of slavery. And you know, even- I think, when you look at Sojourner Truth, who was enslaved in New York State, and you know, there's a kind of gradual emancipation idea that people kind of age into emancipation in New York State. They don't have a kind of one fell swoop thing. It is a point where upon reaching, you know, 18 or 21 ... I'll say that one again. It's upon reaching, you know, a designated age, this person is free. And so Sojourner Truth really had the option of living her life as it was, as opposed to risking her life in this crusade against slavery. In a way, I mean, certainly there were risks for all abolitionists, you know, the men included, but in a way that was much more immediate and much more prominent for women who were engaged in this work than it was even for the men.

Abolitionism as a movement in American history

00:19:07:00

JELANI COBB:
I think that abolitionism is the kind of ancestor of the movements that we saw, subsequent movements we saw that we're all anchored in one reality. It wasn't voiced as succinctly as this, but all of those movements have been trying to articulate the same idea. The idea was that Black people's lives matter. And you know, there's the kind of genealogical connection between those movements. Now, there are lots of differences in terms of leadership or style or approach or tactics, and it's a kind of myriad of dynamics that you could say that are different or that distinguish many of these movements. But fundamentally, if you wanted to find, you know, the one kind of gene that connected all of these movements, it's that. It's trying to take these ideals of the enlightenment, which talk about the value of humanity, and that human beings are capable of being educated and learning and living lives to their fullest, that they have rights that are ordained by God. Taking all of those ideas and saying, we demand that you apply them to the entire spectrum of humanity. And so, Black Lives Matter is a kind of political slogan now, but really it's just a basic philosophical statement as it relates to this country, you know, which is dedicated to the premise, at least it says, ostensibly, that this country is dedicated to the premise that lives matter. That's what the Declaration of Independence says: that lives matter. And we've had a rejoinder since then saying, Black lives matter. You could add too. And that's been the point, this has been the point of contention from this country's founding to the present.

The Black Press

00:21:45:00

JELANI COBB:
Well, the Black Press was crucial for a few reasons. You know, one of them was just the plain reality of talking about what was happening in terms that were not mediated by competing interests or the need to appeal to readers who may be unresolved on the issue of slavery. The Black Press was kind of an immediate and abolitionist voice that you heard.

JELANI COBB:
There's a headline that you see very often as it relates to the Civil War in the Black Press, and it's the Frederick Douglass “Men of Color to Arms” slogan that you see in huge font… that you see in this huge typeface at the top of the paper. And that really is kind of a metaphor for what the entire relationship with the Black Press was to the issue of the war. On just a plain logistical level, he was a voice that was speaking to the people who were most directly affected by the cause at the center of the war. And secondly, kind of practically speaking, if you were hoping that there were going to be men of color who were going to join the war effort, here is the outlet that's saying it. You also have the kind of debates that you weren't seeing in other places. One of the things that is fought out and hashed out in the course, in the Black Press over the course of the years leading up to the war, is whether or not it would be better to let the South go, and say, "If it did, if the South did secede, then there would be no reason that people who escaped from slavery would have to be returned to slavery.” And becomes a question of whether or not the institution of slavery can be killed off more effectively in an independent state than it can be as part of the United States. Now, ultimately, that's not how things play out, but it is a debate, and it's a window into the ways in which the thinking of African-Americans on this issue

did not necessarily align with the thinking of the interested white parties on the issues.

Emancipation and democracy

00:24:17:00

JELANI COBB:
You know, the real point about emancipation, I think, is rarely discussed, or rarely observed, which is that it is presented as an unalloyed moral decision to do what is right, or what is the most democratic way of addressing the position of people who'd been held in bondage. But it was a strategic point. And it meant that people whose lives had been destroyed by the fact that it was politically and economically convenient for one group of white men to hold them in slavery, had now gained their freedom because it was politically and strategically convenient for a different set of white men to emancipate them. And in the midst of this, you have those enslaved Black people themselves agitating for their own freedom.

JELANI COBB:
And so, in a very real sense the events that pushed Lincoln to issue the Emancipation Proclamation are also authored by the actions of the people who are enslaved, who are abandoning the farms and plantations, the places where they're being held in bondage, where people are attempting, where people are eager to join the war on the side of the Union. And the Union is in the odd position of having to turn away potential soldiers in the course of a war in which they desperately need additional soldiers. And so, there are all these kinds of… kind of strategic things that have to align. But fundamentally the position of the enslaved people was the only consistent thing. That they wanted emancipation. They wanted, in that sense, democracy in a country that held

itself as a democracy. They wanted freedom in a country that was allegedly founded upon the principle of freedom. And it took other people of considerable advantage, considerable wealth, considerable education, decades in this country to actually grapple with things that unlettered enslaved people understood about democracy from the outset.

Lincoln's evolution towards emancipation

00:27:14:00

JELANI COBB:
I think that Lincoln changes over the course of the war. Some of those changes are forced upon him by circumstance. You know, at the outset of the war, he believes that this is a skirmish. He has no idea, nor does anyone else in the North, what exactly is going to ensue over the course of the next four years. He loses his son. He's changed in that way, personally. He recognizes the valor after the Emancipation Proclamation, and when Black soldiers begin in the war effort in 1863, he recognizes the valor of that nearly 200,000 person force that joins and becomes crucial to the Union victory. And so, one of the points of evolution, I think, is that at the beginning of the war, we're talking about Black people being confiscated in the way that you would confiscate any object in the course of war. We can take your cannon, we can take your horses, we can also take your slaves. And so there's no real grappling with Black humanity.

JELANI COBB:
By the end of the war, really toward the end of the war, Lincoln is talking in his personal correspondence about emancipation being key, and that what they're actually trying to put together, what they're trying to negotiate, is a transaction. He says this: that we have to give Black people a reason to believe in our cause. They're interested in freedom. We are interested in the preservation of the

Union. And we are making this proposition. We're essentially making a deal. And Lincoln knows this. Lincoln recognizes this in 1863, 1864. Subsequently, there's been almost no conversation about that. If you kind of go to the most general depictions of Lincoln, he quote unquote freed the slaves. It's not that the people were enslaved helped him save the Union that he was tasked with protecting when he took that oath to uphold and defend the Constitution. He needed Black people to be able to do that.

JELANI COBB:
And so this is not a sophisticated transaction between two self-interested and rational parties. This is the beneficent father who bestows upon the benighted slave his long mislaid freedom. And so he's made into a kind of savior figure that immediately discards – he's made into this kind of savior figure that is completely irreconcilable with the history of what actually happened. And so we can't know or understand Lincoln at the same time that we have an emotional investment in preserving him as a savior.

JELANI COBB:
So I think one of the things about Lincoln is that he had a kind of strategic and military engagement with these questions at the heart of the war, as he had to, but he also had a philosophical and legal and historical engagement with those questions. And so if you read the speech he gave at Cooper Union, where he is walking through the history of the founding in order to grapple with the question of whether or not the founders intended for slavery to be this sacrosanct institution that the federal government had no power to abolish, and what he does is kind of deductive reasoning over the statements that were made, the thoughts that were expressed, the documents that were written, the votes that were taken, the people who were actually present at the founding and what they did subsequently in Congress and what they wrote, and comes to this

opinion that there is nothing in the Constitution or in the thinking of the founders en masse, a preponderance, that said that the federal government had no power over this one single institution of slavery. And you know, that's where kind of Lincoln comes down on it.

00:32:13:00

JELANI COBB:

But I think that in looking at the Declaration of Independence and the founding of the nation, at the heart of that is this question of the right to be free, the right to cast off shackles, the right to be -- and of course people are not talking about the enslaved population when they say this. And at the same time, you know, the subsequent document, the Constitution, is shot through with these various debates or these various compromises and clauses and structures that really do benefit the institution of slavery: the protection of the transatlantic slave trade, the creation of the Electoral College, the idea that there is a actual constitutional mandate to return people who were enslaved if they escaped to freedom, that they have to be returned to slavery. Like, all of these points, and there are more these points that go to furthering and defending the cause of slavery. And so Lincoln, I think, is really trying to navigate these things. Then it's not simply Lincoln, it doesn't simply fall on Lincoln shoulders, because when you look at what happens in Congress in the course of these years, even immediately after Lincoln's death, you know, with the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments, they are really trying to reconcile the ideal of Black freedom with the Constitution. And so it's not a kind of simple matter. And I don't think that it was easy for any of them to navigate, for anyone in this society at that point, to navigate the open and contradictory nature of the founding documents.

What the David Bowser insignia represents

00:34:17:00

JELANI COBB:

There's an insignia that featured the image of a Black soldier standing, holding a rifle with a bayonet point directed at a cowering white Confederate soldier who was on the ground. Every time I see that image I get chills because it is such an audacious inversion of what the reality was. That in 1863, 1864, 1865, there were Black men, many of them former slaves, who were willing to fight and kill on behalf of the cause of freedom for themselves and their people, is just – it continues to be an astounding concept. Just the reversal of fortune is difficult for us to even grasp because I don't think we have terms that are that broad in our understanding for how different those two positions were. And so that's one part of it. At the same time, they knew that the stakes were higher for them, that in circumstances in which white soldiers could surrender and be taken as prisoners of war – which we don't want to dismiss the horrors of this, as we kind of know about Andersonville and the torment that prisoners of war faced in the course of the war. But even that didn't equal the possibility of Black soldiers being not allowed to surrender, like what happened in Fort Pillow in 1864, where the Black Union soldiers attempted to surrender the fort and instead they were massacred. Or, worse than death, be sold back into slavery. Or for people who had not been enslaved, be sold into slavery. And so in taking up the bayonet and donning the blue uniform of the Union, I think the consequences in the minds of Black soldiers weighed differently, or had different register, than it did in the minds of many white soldiers.

What was at stake for Black soldiers

00:37:00:00

JELANI COBB:

In the aftermath of Fort Pillow, you saw Black soldiers who were saying, "Remember Fort Pillow," when they were going into battle. And this is a very

48 Wheeler Ave, 3rd Floor Pleasantville, NY 10570 T 914-238-6800 kunhardtfilmfoundation.org

real kind of resonance for – America had been “Remember the Alamo,” the Texans, or remember the kind of outrages that had been imposed upon them by the British during the course of the Revolutionary War. They're talking about the slaughter of this and also reminding people themselves of the stakes, that you were not fighting against people who are going to necessarily adhere to the codes of war or the standards of conduct in the course of war. That every engagement is a life and death engagement, and to keep in the front of your mind the conditions that you were fighting under. It's also a reminder of what people are fighting for. And so there's that. I also think that another point that succinctly conveys the reality of what it was like for Black soldiers is that image of Gordon, the -- Gordon the enslaved Black man who, famous image people have seen of his back, which is just a lattice of scar tissue from all of the times that he's been whipped, and the popularization of that image, which was taken for very strategic and political reasons.

JELANI COBB:
In order to dispel the myth that slavery was this benign familial institution. You had this image of Gordon, you could see what exactly slavery had done to him. But they paired that, which we always see the image of his back. We rarely see the second image, which is the image of Gordon in uniform. And it is the most powerful depiction of what was at stake. On the one hand, it's like before and after. On the one hand, you have this man whose back is a literal testament to the horrors of slavery. And on the other hand, you have this man who was in an army fighting to end it. And I think that summarizes the emotional import of what it meant for people to be able to put on the uniform after 1863 and join the Union ranks.

The South’s “moral victory”

00:39:51:00

JELANI COBB:

I have to take issue with the question of whether slavery would have persisted if the South had won the war. And the reason I say that is that the South only lost the war militarily, that the regime that endured after, after Reconstruction and the rise of segregation, of lynching, of the political elimination of Black people, terrorism, all of those things were at the behest of the South. Even into the 20th century, the middle of the 20th century, the federal unwillingness to take more aggressive actions on the issue of civil rights happened as a matter of deference to the South. And so, what we saw was the old cliche of losing the war but winning the peace. Or as I like to say about at the end of the war, the South pledged that it would rise again, and it never did – instead the rest of the country sank down to meet it.

Lincoln's use of language

00:41:15:00

JELANI COBB:

Lincoln himself didn't think of his presidency in the terms that his subsequent defenders did. You know, he was keenly aware of questions and contradictions, and likely a very self-aware figure, particularly for, like, we don't have that kind of language for people in the 19th century, but he seemed to understand himself and the context that he operated in. And that's one part of it. The other part of it, though, is that when Lincoln talks about the rebirth of democracy, he is not as sanguine or as blithe as subsequent interpretations of him have been. And what I mean by that is, that by 1865, Lincoln has commanded the country through four years of the bloodiest war that had ever seen then, or now. A war that was so brutal that the United States would have to fight World War II almost twice –

48 Wheeler Ave, 3rd Floor Pleasantville, NY 10570 T 914-238-6800 kunhardtfilmfoundation.org

that's 20th century warfare – we'd have to fight that war almost twice to equal the number of people who died in the course of the Civil War in 19th century warfare. It was much more difficult to kill people.

JELANI COBB:
He has seen that. He has seen the depth to which the forces arrayed against him would sink in order to defeat him and the cause of the Union. I say it, to say that Lincoln has a very wary eye about human nature and human affairs. And so the best way, I think, of looking at that is to read that first inaugural speech, the speech that he gives in 1861. And it is, if you go through, it's not inspirational. It's longish. It has lots of things that are what you would expect in a standard inauguration speech. And then read the speech he gave in 1865 in the second inaugural.

JELANI COBB:
In that second inaugural, Lincoln does something that we had not seen American statesmen do before, certainly not American presidents, and that is, he grapples with the moral implications of an allegedly democratic state holding people in bondage. And he does this moral calculation, which I think is an astonishing sentence for anyone to have said, any white person to have said in 1865, all the more so for a head of state to say this. What he says is that, "If it's God's will, every drop of blood that has been drawn by the lash may have to be equalled by a drop of blood drawn by the sword." He was saying, we may have to suffer as much violence as we have inflicted on these people in order to persevere as a nation. And if that happens, the judgments of God are right and just.

00:45:17:00

JELANI COBB:

I mean, you have Thomas Jefferson saying that he trembles for his nation, in his correspondence, trembles for his nation when he thinks about the fact that there is a just God. And you know, it was this kind of oblique reference to, we all know that what we're doing here is savage and indefensible. But Lincoln says it outright in that succinct speech.

JELANI COBB:
You know, if you had gotten up to get some water and come back, the speech would be over. It is this succinct kind of gem of economy. And that's it, that's all that has to be said, but it is so resonant. And then, even to the idea of saying that the nation will proceed with malice toward none, that is a tremendous gesture of equanimity. At the same time, it opens the door to this kind of North and South reconciliation that excludes the rights of a formerly enslaved people. And so Lincoln says, "With malice toward none," and in theory, that means none, all people. In practice, it meant the possible tentative reconciliation of North and South at the expense of Black.

A truer idea of Lincoln

00:47:02:00

JELANI COBB:
I think it's possible to tell a true story about Lincoln, or it's possible to tell a truer story about Lincoln, and – to get at the exact truth of any human being, much less one as complicated and tested and really layered as Lincoln, that's a daunting task. That may not be possible. But it's like the idea of a more perfect union. You know, you don't get a perfect union. You're not going to have a perfect union. But the ideal is to establish a *more* perfect union. And so, we can try to strive for a tru*er* idea of who Lincoln was and what he did, and what he stood for, but the truth, I think that'll always remain at least partially an enigma.

48 Wheeler Ave, 3rd Floor Pleasantville, NY 10570 T 914-238-6800 kunhardtfilmfoundation.org

JELANI COBB:

I think it's crucial to try to get to who Lincoln was, in the context of his time and in the moment that he existed in, because that's the only real way that we can make use of him as an example. You know, we can't really learn anything from -- certainly we can't learn from anything, from as sterile and antiseptic a depiction of Lincoln as we have now, but it is in understanding the trial and error and the failures and the shortcomings and the contradictions that he becomes most useful to us. And really, only by understanding the things he got wrong can we really grasp the magnitude and importance of the things that he got right.

JELANI COBB:

In our popular reference now, we think of abolitionists as people who thought that the races should be equal. That wasn't true, necessarily. There were people who did think this way, and then there were people who had a kind of animal rights approach to the institution of slavery, that they didn't think that it was right to treat people the way that they'd been treated, or to hold them in bondage, or to sell them, or to any of the things that went with the institution of slavery, but that should not be taken to mean that Black people and white people are equal. That's an abolitionist camp. Lincoln was not in the abolitionist camp, if we say, by abolitionism, people who were actively fighting for the eradication of the institution of slavery. Southerners preferred to think of him as this. You know, certainly by 1860, by the election, it would've been hard to shake them of the sense that Lincoln was no different than William Lloyd Garrison, but his ideas were contradictory in our modern sensibilities. He had a general disdain for the institution of slavery. He did not think that it was defensible to subject people to the kinds of depredations that were inherent in slavery.

JELANI COBB:

At the same time, racial equality, he says in the course of the Lincoln-Douglas debates, famously, that if there's a superior and inferior position to be assigned

in this society, he, as any white man, would prefer that whites be assigned to the superior position. You know, his defenders have argued that this was political rhetoric or this was an attempt to get elected and so on, but at the very least, he's willing to play to that cause. The more indicting idea about Lincoln is, toward the end of his life, where he's sketching out his plans for what a reconstruction might look like. You know, the war has freshly ended and there has to be some mechanism for bringing the feuding halves of the country back into one whole.

00:51:40:00

JELANI COBB:

And he does recognize that Negro suffrage is going to be key to this. And he kind of muses that perhaps the Black vote could be restricted to former soldiers or, quote, very intelligent Blacks, which in a country that made no intelligence bar for white suffrage, inherently states that he may believe that there's something suspect about Black intelligence and Black capacity to utilize the ballot. And so he's riddled with the contradictions of men of his era. And I've maintained that the argument for Lincoln's heroism is not that he got everything right. It was his willingness to grapple with the questions, even the questions he got wrong. And so, no, those two things are not the same though. His disdain for the institution of slavery did not automatically connote a belief in interracial equality.

Invoking Lincoln in modern times

00:53:00:00

JELANI COBB:

I think there's an inclination to seek out Lincoln in trying times and amidst difficulty and uncertainty. I think that, by all means, the moment that we're in and the point that we've been navigating throughout the course of the Trump presidency, and certainly in that chaotic moment of January 6th, where we saw

the United States Capitol stormed just ahead of a presidential inauguration, they all call to mind Lincoln. And, more specifically, they call to mind the turbulence and the currents in American politics that were so volatile in Lincoln's time and have not entirely been tamed in the time we live in now. Even more specifically, there are things about Lincoln, in his experience, that have leapt out at you if you're looking at current events. The fact that Abraham Lincoln had to be smuggled into Washington, DC under threat of his life ahead of inauguration. And we saw an inauguration in 2021 of an American president in which the city was occupied, essentially, by 20,000 National Guard troops, to protect the life of the incoming president. We've seen the accusations of betrayal and elections that are thought to have not been representative in one way, shape or form. And all of these dynamics that are extremely dangerous in a democracy. And in that moment, you think about the first president who was tasked with navigating that kind of situation in the crucible of major conflict and it's Lincoln.

The myth of Lincoln as the "Great Emancipator"

00:55:18:00

JELANI COBB:

There are two diametrically opposed views of Lincoln that are equally troubling. One is of Lincoln as this unblemished faultless avatar of American democracy who wiped the slate clean in issuing the Emancipation Proclamation, and holding the Union together in the course of the war he made any subsequent grappling with the moral and political horrors of slavery unnecessary. And that rather than grapple with what actually happened and the economic and political will that was mustered to preserve slavery for as long as it endured in this country, we can just kind of go, "There it is, we're good!" The other is a completely cynical rejection of Lincoln. And that side of it diminishes almost anything that he does as a consequence of either self-interest or the furtherance

and preservation of white supremacy, which doesn't hold up either, because as I always say in those conversations, however contradictory and problematic Lincoln was, he was still progressive enough to get himself shot in the head in the theater that night.

END TC: 00:57:04