

# KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

EDWARD AYERS  
*LINCOLN'S DILEMMA*  
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**Edward Ayers Interview**  
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**Interviewed by Jackie Olive & Barak Goodman**  
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CREW MEMBER:

Edward Ayers interview. Take one. Marker. Give me one minute to settle.

WORDS ON SCREEN:

Edward Ayers

HISTORIAN, UNIVERSITY OF RICHMOND

## **The context of Lincoln's election victory**

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EDWARD AYERS:

Yeah. It's always hard to forget what we know. So let's put ourselves back in that moment and you realize he is a one-term Congressman, which is a bad sign in and of itself. And he's from the west, Illinois. And he's unusual looking. Everybody is struck by how tall and thin he looks. The famous line, he was accused of being two faced. He says, "Do you think if I had two faces, this is the one that I would use?" You know? So he's sort of making the most of what he has in that regard.

EDWARD AYERS:

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But on the other hand, the Republican party is brand new. It's open to new talent. It's trying to find a way to be firm in its protection of the territories of the west, without alienating all the voters who are afraid of abolitionists. So he fits the role perfectly because he is unknown. You don't really want to be dragging a lot of formal words and editorials into this. So ironically, his strength is that he's somewhat of a blank slate.

EDWARD AYERS:

So by the time of 1860, Americans really have been arguing about slavery for 30 years in this form. And you've had everything from Nat Turner's Rebellion in 1831 to John Brown's raid. On that hand, you've had the rise of abolitionism, the appearance of someone like Frederick Douglass, who is such a powerful figure, an entire press that's deeply polarized. You find what's interesting is that the North is very divided between the Democrats and the Republicans. And so you need to find somebody who can mobilize this kind of hodgepodge party of the Republicans, which are kind of assembled from nativist and from free soil advocates and from sort of marginal abolitionists and from people who used to be Whigs and that party disappeared. So as we picture the Republicans, you need to imagine it's as if it just emerged four years before a presidential election today, think how strange that would be to have that, and how do you hold that together?

EDWARD AYERS:

Nativists who really are anti-Catholic and who see conspiracies of the papacy everywhere, with people who are trying to extend America's bounty to all Americans. And so the centrifugal forces are great. So that's why Lincoln doesn't say anything for over a year after his election. And that's again hard for us to imagine. We're used to someone not saying anything for an hour, it seems to be news, right? But for a whole year, to basically let his lieutenants represent him, to let the image of "Honest Abe." I think about why that is.

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Why is he called "Honest Abe?" Partly because the man he's replacing James Buchanan was seen as dishonest. And it's also what Americans are looking for. Who's going to help steer us through this? Who's going to be able to find a way to speak about something that we've all been talking about for over a generation now?

## **Lincoln's Principles**

00:03:27:00

EDWARD AYERS:

In the context of America at this time, to say that "I do not believe slavery should be allowed to expand." Is not a moderate position, okay?. It is not an extreme position of the abolitionists who were calling for slavery to be destroyed where it is. But if you had added up all the Democrats, who are almost half the electorate in the North, and all white Southerners, most white Americans would be opposed to that position. So it's not that he's moderate, it's that he is principled in believing one big thing, which is that slavery cannot expand. So that is the position of the Republican party.

EDWARD AYERS:

Now you can imagine there, if you're a Republican who really has no patience with Black people, you'd want slavery not to expand so that it will not sully the place that you want to move with your family, right? On the other hand, if you're one of the relatively rare white Americans who is full of sympathy with Black Americans, you don't want to have them precluded from enjoying the bounty of America

EDWARD AYERS: .

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So those are two profoundly different positions. So I don't think it could be moderate than that. I think that what you have to be is careful. And I think Lincoln is wily. He's silent when it's to his advantage. When he does speak, he says exactly what he means, because he knows how many snares there are that are going to get him caught in all this. So I think that what we need to see is that Lincoln is that interesting combination of ambition and humility, right? If he's going to run for president, basically out of nowhere, he's got a pretty strong sense of self, but his sense of humility is "I don't understand why white Southerners feel this way."

EDWARD AYERS:

And he says later, "If we were them, we'd feel the same way, right?" and he understands why it is people would be skeptical of the 2% of the white North that would identify as abolitionist, right? So he gets that as well. So he comes into it with a sense of "Look, I understand what you're all saying, but the fact is that the Constitution never intended for slavery to expand. They thought it was going to fade away. I'm living up to the principles of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. And it's time for us to stop the spread of this. I honor the Constitution so I'm not going to pretend that I have the right to destroy slavery, where it exists, but because also under the Constitution, I am going to say, we cannot allow it to expand and be put therefore on a path to ultimate extinction."

EDWARD AYERS:

So we need to understand it's far more complicated landscape than anything that we would know today, right? Politics is polarized, but with multiple poles, it's not just, you know, two sides, there are many sides, even within his own party. So the radicals want one thing, the moderates wants something else, but they've got to be able to persuade some Democrats to join them as well.

EDWARD AYERS:

So I think one way to picture Lincoln here is, and he was pictured as this, was walking a tight rope. That is a good way to imagine all this and he knows it. So I think that the fact that he is cautious is not a sign of fear, it's a sign of recognizing what he's up against.

### **The South's apprehension about Lincoln**

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EDWARD AYERS:

The South had declared long before whoever the "Black Republicans", as they called the Republicans, put forward, they would oppose them. It's not about Lincoln because if it had been William Seward or a far more outspoken opponent of slavery for a long time, they would have known what to do with it. So in many ways they just filled in the blanks of whoever Abraham Lincoln was. He was an abolitionist. He was opposed to the South. He was tyrannical. He was unjustly elected with less than 40% of the vote. So it didn't really matter who he was or what he said, the white South was going to vilify him and to portray him as a threat to the future of the country, no matter what he said or did. You know, he speeches he'd given with Stephen Douglas gave a good sense of his firmness on this. Steven Douglas, a Democrat who wasn't Democrat enough for the white South, he wasn't extreme enough.

EDWARD AYERS:

So they had to find John C Breckenridge who would be far more rigorous in defending the white South. So in many ways, the Lincoln of 1860 was an invention of the white South. They projected on him, all that they feared and in some ways, what they needed him to be. The people who wanted the South to mobilize in the face of this realized that they had to act quickly because

there's two things that might happen once Lincoln took office. One, he might do something or two, he might not. And either way was a threat to the people who wanted the South to draw a firm line. So what if he doesn't do anything? What if he shows and he's as moderate as he claims to be? And the threat there is, he might actually be able to recruit some white Southerners to join this new Republican party. That's his dream is creating a new national party, like the Whigs that he'd grown up in and admired. He doesn't want to have a sectional party. He wants to bring in people like Andrew Johnson of East Tennessee to help create a national party. Well, that's a big threat to secessionists on one hand, or on the other hand, he might do something that would mobilize and foreclose the South acting. So the white South is, you know, we see how quickly the Deep South states secede before Lincoln has any opportunity.

### **Why the Deep South secedes**

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EDWARD AYERS:

So the deep South secedes, because they see this as a chance of a lifetime. Many of the so-called fire eaters have been calling for years, that we're going to have to draw the line so that the white North recognizes that we helped establish this nation. Matter of fact, we played an out-sized role of Virginia's-writing the founding documents, leading the nation early on. We are the birthplace of George Washington. This is our country. How dare they tell us that we don't have equal right to it, right? And so they'd been looking for a chance to say enough is enough. Now, we need to understand that by seceding, they don't mean to start the Civil War necessarily, right? Matter of fact, if they'd had any idea what was going to happen through this action, they were going to destroy American slavery in the only way American slavery

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could have been destroyed, they wouldn't have done it. So that's why we can't get ahead of the story.

EDWARD AYERS:

So what did they know in the fall and winter of 1860? What they knew is that a sectional party had elected a man explicitly opposed to the one thing they call for, which is the right to expand slavery, okay? So that's all they need to know, right? And what they say is, if we act in a unified way, even though we're talking about state's rights, we recognize that unless we create something larger than States, we're going to call their bluff. And we're going to say, "Hey, here's what's going to happen. You're going to destroy the country if you don't give us this right in the proposed 13th amendment, to say that slavery can never be disturbed where it is. So that's all we ask is to have slavery protected forever."

EDWARD AYERS:

So they think that if they can get all the slave States to act in unison, that they will get the North to back down because they can see the electoral map and realize, okay, Lincoln has a lot of opposition in the North and he has unified opposition in the South. Therefore we have the advantage if we don't let him use the powers of the presidency to take advantage of this opportunity.

There's a problem with this strategy though, which is that, how do you persuade the States of the upper South to come along? Because what could happen South Carolina found back in, you know, in a nullification crisis 30 years ago. If you go out on your own, you're on your own, okay? You don't really have any power. It's also the case if just the deep South States go, they're leaving out the state with the most enslaved people of any state in the Union, which is Virginia. And if Virginia doesn't go, then North Carolina and Tennessee, aren't likely to go, and Kentucky. So their bold gamble is if they act decisively and create this Confederacy, they could then go to the upper South

and say, "Come join us and we will be able to stop the spread of this disease of abolitionism."

EDWARD AYERS:

Well, if you look at the map, you'll see a lot of places where slavery is most entrenched, where the big slave holders live they say, "We don't want to secede because we actually voted for the Constitutional Union Party, because if you'll notice the constitution protects slavery, where it is, and I've got what I want. I'm not looking to move to Texas," right? So you have this tension within the white South, which is another reason the people in charge secede. If we don't do this now, we're going to start coming apart at the seams among ourselves as well. Not to mention the three-fourths of white Southerners who do not own enslaved people at all. So there is an urgency to take advantage of the passion of the moment, to move in a way that they fear will not be possible if they wait until Lincoln takes office.

EDWARD AYERS:

The upper South, however, says we're not going to act until he does take office and see what happens. I think that's something people don't understand is how long a time passes between the secession of the Deep South and the secession of the upper South. The people who were elected to the conventions of the upper South, especially in Virginia, are elected to save the United States, not to secede. And when they come to Richmond to debate it, for weeks and weeks and weeks, they vote over and over again, not to secede. So we need to understand as Lincoln's taking office, all of this is in play. And so his strategy is "how do I prevent the Confederacy from consolidating its position and really threatening the United States?"

### **Lincoln's strategy with Virginia**

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EDWARD AYERS:

So as Lincoln is coming across the North on the train, speaking to audiences, but very carefully thinking what he's going to say. The states of the Deep South are already seceding. So by the time he arrives in Washington, he's being confronted with the accomplished reality of the creation of what he always calls the "so-called Confederacy." He never acknowledges that it's legitimate at all, but he recognizes that he must try to keep the upper South from joining the lower South. He must act in a way that simultaneously principled and firm, "No, I'm not going to back down from the stop of spreading slavery. On the other hand, I tell you, I have no constitutional right to touch slavery, where it is." So all of you people who are on the fence think about this. Do you really want to put that at risk for somebody who's telling you that the constitution protects slavery where it is. On the other hand, he will not tolerate anything that erodes the legitimacy or authority of the United States, such as a state taking a fort or a federal property, or the "so-called Confederacy" acting against the United States.

EDWARD AYERS:

So that's the fine line that he's walking. He doesn't want to precipitate the crisis, but he can't just let it run without opposition, which is what James Buchanan has done. Lincoln is not looking for a fight, he's trying to buy as much time as possible. He watches Virginia, hopeful, hoping that the unionists there we'll be able to persuade the fellow slaveholders not to secede. He has a famous line, "If he loses Kentucky, he's lost everything." The South is remarkably complicated and divided within itself. And they have old political divisions between the Whigs and the Democrats that are still alive, even though the Whigs don't exist anymore. The job of the secessionist is to persuade the very reluctant upper South to join this. So here's a great irony. They go to Virginia, they basically send a lobbyist to go up and wine and dine these delegates and to give speeches and to talk to them off the record and to

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make them promises, "Hey, if you'll join this Confederacy, you could be the Capitol of the new nation. The very place you had this new statue of George Washington, you should be the capital of the nation that's devoted to the same virtues and values that George Washington stood for. And Richmond is the leading industrial city of this new nation. If you would join us, that would be great. If you don't, here's the situation. We just walked out of Congress, think how vulnerable you are right now. That now you are going to be the only slave state left in the United States if you don't come. How long do you think that's going to last?"

EDWARD AYERS:

But you read the 3,000 pages of debates in Virginia. And they say, if there is a war, we will be the Flanders of America. Virginia will be the battlefield. Our land will be drenched in blood. And plus it was our grandfathers who created the United States. We can't do this. And so that is the tension. And We need to understand that the beginning of Lincoln's administration is trying to navigate that: to be, not alienate the party that's elected him, on the other hand, not to alienate the slave South. Ultimately Virginia says, "We must stand with our sisters slave States."

## **Lincoln was not an abolitionist**

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EDWARD AYERS:

So Lincoln is not an abolitionist because he does not think that what the abolitionists are calling for, which is the immediate beginning of the end of slavery is sanctioned by the constitution. That's why William Lloyd Garrison, leading abolitionist, calls the Constitution "a pact with the devil." Lincoln, because he reveres the Constitution, the Declaration of the United States, says "As much as I hate slavery, we cannot end it right now. What we can do is stop

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its spread so that it turns in upon itself. And so that as in the days, when the Constitution was written, when it looked as if slavery was going to disappear, because its markets had been destroyed because the land had been worn out, slavery will consume the South. It will consume that land. And so we would do better to end slavery by not acting rashly against it." So he would not have called himself an abolitionist because by this time the abolitionists had a very specific goal, which is the abolition of slavery where it was. Now, this of course, leaves Lincoln open to charges of being soft on slavery. But from his point of view, "I'm being realistic. I'm doing what I can to stop it."

EDWARD AYERS:

Lincoln makes two mistakes that we might think of in this regard one, he overestimates white Southerners who do not own slaves. He's heard them. He's heard Henry Clay, his big hero, a slaveholder from Kentucky extol the Union. He cannot believe that white Southerners don't love the United States enough to defend it when push comes to shove, when they have no explicit economic interest in defending slavery. So he believes longer than he might have that there's going to be an upsurge of support for the United States among non slave holding white Southerners. And even some slave holding white Southerners, many of whom have been professed unionists only months before. So that's a miscalculation. He can't be blamed for that. He has too much faith in the people that his own origins trace to. He has origins in the white South and he believes that they believe what they have said before that they love the United States. You see, the United States military is dominated by Southerners who are fighting for the United States, are building their careers. People like Robert E. Lee are devoted to protecting the United States. He thinks that they will come to their senses, when push comes to shove, that they will choose the United States.

EDWARD AYERS:

The other miscalculation he might make, which was common among Republicans is how strong slavery was in 1860. I find that people of lots of different political persuasions believe that slavery would have faded away had there not been the Civil War. But the fact is, that slavery had never been stronger than it was in 1860. Its profits had never been greater. Its prices of enslaved people had never been higher. The problem was that precisely because it was so profitable, it was becoming concentrated in fewer and fewer hands. So the South was becoming ever more an oligarchy of white people. So those three fourths of white Southerners calculate this and they think, "Well, how are we ever going to have a future in this slave society? Only by being able to move to new cheap land, where we might be able to get a start."

EDWARD AYERS:

So by underestimating how vital slavery was. And as you would see in Richmond, adapting to industrialization, into new kinds of crops and by overestimating white Southerners loyalty to the Union, Lincoln thinks that the Republican plan of constraining slavery, having it slowly die, a strong newness impulse rise, that's what he envisions. But both those things fail.

### **Lincoln's response to the eruption of violence**

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EDWARD AYERS:

Well, since the 1830s, really his first speech, he's warned Americans, that the threat of violence is against one another, is one of the greatest threats inside the United States. And so he's seen riots throughout the North against the abolitionists, but also against immigrants ,also against Black people. He knows that there's a potential for violence throughout American society in

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the North, as well as the South. So he doesn't exaggerate that. He also doesn't exaggerate the determination of the secessionists to push this as far as they possibly can, because some of the secessionists do want to leave the United States and create a new nation that's based on the explicit acknowledgement of the perpetual existence of slavery.

EDWARD AYERS:

And they're saying the constitution generally is great, let's just fix that flaw where they neglected to protect slavery as explicitly as they should. And here's the other thing, let's give the president a six year term instead of a four year term, which actually turns out to be significant. They don't know that at the beginning. So Lincoln looks at this and you have on one hand, a language of caution by the secessionist. We're going to be... We're just upholding the values of the Constitution of the declaration the independence of white males rights, just like our forefathers did. On the other hand, he doesn't trust the guys in charge of the secession movement, especially in Charleston, who seem to be spoiling for a fight.

EDWARD AYERS:

And in fact, they are, they realized that the more time that passes the greater opportunity, Lincoln might have to work his way out of this. He might be able to persuade the upper South and not to secede he might be able to find some kind of compromise that would give the strong defenders of slavery, some kind of way out. He's not going to back off on expansion of slavery, but he recognizes that maybe there's something that we could do. So he's willing to think about constitutional amendments, but ultimately his hand is called by Fort Sumpter just as the Confederates intend for it to be, they're going to force him to do something.

EDWARD AYERS:

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Now again, let's think about Virginia, which is a very interesting in this regard, they do not secede after Fort Sumter itself. They secede in which Lincoln says, "You need to give me troops to put down this illegal rebellion in Charleston." So suddenly Virginia delegates have to decide, do we send our own men against fellow white slave holders in South Carolina? So it's that calling up of the troops that triggers the final vote in which Virginia, with some of the delegates crying votes to secede. And that ends up being a large part of their story on is that Lincoln forced us into this. That becomes their story: we did not choose to secede, Lincoln gave us no choice by forcing us to raise troops against fellow Americans and we refused to do it. So that becomes a story that elevates the Confederacy in the eyes of reluctant Confederates, who say, this proves that we were acting from high-minded purposes. It shows that we were acting for constitutional reasons and this is how Robert E. Lee could justify to himself that he's going to side with Virginia, because "now what I'm doing is siding with a State defending it's constitutional rights."

## **Lincoln's state of mind as war breaks out**

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EDWARD AYERS:

Lincoln does not want a war. And ironically, it may be that no one else does to it. If they had any idea of what war was going to be, they think they might be able to have one battle in which the white South is very confident that they would beat the United States. The United States is confident that they would beat the white South, if it's one battle. So we've got to forget the Civil War to understand the Civil War. We can't imagine that the equivalent of 8 million people today are killed in this war. We cannot imagine that the largest, most powerful system of slavery in the modern world is destroyed historically overnight. You've got to forget all those things. What do they think might

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happen? What they think might happen is that they're going to call each other's bluff and the other side's going to back down.

EDWARD AYERS:

So Lincoln thinks, look, I'm going to be as cautious as possible because my goal is still the same as it's been all along, which is to save the United States and to lay the foundation for unity through a national party. So I don't want to alienate any more people than I have to. On the other hand, I have sworn an oath to protect the United States and losing control of a Fort or a custom house is a part of the oath that I swore. So Lincoln is thinking, "okay, how do I move to the next step? So the first step is how do I persuade the upper South not to secede." He fails with Virginia, North Carolina and Tennessee, but succeeds with Kentucky. That's very important as it turns out over the course of the war, and that's a major victory, and that may have been the most that he could have succeeded in at that time.

EDWARD AYERS:

The United States is not prepared to fight a war at the beginning of Lincoln's administration. The United States has actually prided itself on not having a large standing army or a Navy. The people it has attracted are often talented as they demonstrated the Mexican War but the United States is not ready to go to war in 1861. So Lincoln is trying everything he can to maintain the reason he was elected and not go to war. He's willing to talk about almost anything except permitting the expansion of slavery.

EDWARD AYERS:

So it turns out Lincoln was right in the sense that the United States was not ready to fight a war. And it turns out that the Confederacy was not ready to fight a war. We know the Battle of Bull Run, Manassas – the "great skedaddle," the United States is driven from the field. But when everyone sees how atrocious this war is going to be with modern weapons, everybody is

appalled at the scale and the suffering. So it's a long time until Lincoln feels ready to actually go to war against the Confederacy.

EDWARD AYERS:

Lincoln sees himself always on the defensive, it is an awkward address. He says, it's in your hands my fellow Americans, that the future of America lies, right? I am not going to start a war. Okay. If you are going to push us into it, you need to know that we will defend the United States. We will defend the Constitution. And so when the Confederacy consolidates and elects Jefferson Davis and creates a new government there in Richmond and mobilizes an army, even though it's an army doesn't even have matching uniforms, it's still just kind of hobbled together and tries to take land close to Washington, D.C in Virginia, Lincoln knows that he has to resist this and that only military strength will resist it. Okay. So from his point of view, he's done nothing to cause the Civil War in every step he's been playing defense and not being as aggressive as he might have. But once you see what war is going to look like at Manassas, he recognizes that to save the United States we are going to have to build an Army and a Navy. And one of the remarkable stories of American history is how fast the United States is able to mobilizes to pull people in like U.S. Grant, who's sort of, you know, out of the army and to bring that talent back in and to be able to start building the ships on the coast and to be thinking about river boats and new kinds of armaments and submarines and all these kinds of things. It's a remarkable mobilization. Once Lincoln is forced to the recognition, the acknowledgement the only force is going to stop this rebellion against the United States.

### **Lincoln's evolution on the institution of slavery and of enslaved people**

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EDWARD AYERS:

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You might think that once the war begins, that Lincoln would become radicalized. He would say all along, "I've never been radical." Maybe partly because there is a branch of his party called the radicals and he is not them. And they don't think he is them, right? They think they have to keep pushing him to act as boldly as he needs to. So what you find is that Lincoln at each step does what he thinks is necessary to try to stop the rebellion, right? And so I'd say he has one foot on the accelerator, one foot on the brake at all times, he's going to do what's necessary, but he's also not trying to overwhelm the South. If you told anybody at the beginning of the war that the United States army is going to mobilize enough force to conquer an area the size of continental Europe, nobody, especially the white South, maybe a lot of the white North, would have thought that was possible.

EDWARD AYERS:

So now we look back on that and know, every textbook has the graph that shows how much more stuff the United States had than the Confederacy—how many more guns and men. But what the white South had, was it's home field advantage. It's defending a) it's home, which mobilizes people, but it's also an incredibly large diverse intractable terrain. So Lincoln could not have imagined that the United States would be able to mobilize enough people to overrun all of the Confederacy. What he was trying to do is get them to a point, over and over again, where they would negotiate a peace in which they would come back into the United States, but they would accept the non-expansion of slavery. Okay. So that's his strategy for a long time, until it proves that we're not going to defeat the Confederacy unless we destroy slavery. Okay. We're not going to save the United States without destroying slavery.

EDWARD AYERS:

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So he becomes radical in that sense, in believing that there has to be a conjoining of the two great purposes of the war. One, which the Democrats see as directly at odds with each other. If you want to save the United States give the Confederate States a reason to compromise and to come back in, stop sending our boys off to die when you could compromise out of this. The Radical Republicans say, "No, we've got to seize this moment to destroy slavery forever and holy." Lincoln is thinking, "I want to stop the war, stop this suffering. Save the United States. It's not exactly clear what the ultimate fate of slavery might be. Right? But it is clear that we cannot allow the Confederates to keep using their enslaved population against us." So that's what he decides in 1862. And that's what becomes embodied in the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863.

EDWARD AYERS:

People look at this and say, well, he had ulterior motives all he wanted to do is to win well, which is if that's all I wanted, that was fine too. But it's also the case that he recognizes that getting the reports from the field, look at the enslaved people and the chances they are taking to make themselves free. Three weeks after Virginia secedes, enslaved men go to Fort Monroe, near Norfolk and declare themselves on the side of the United States. Now think about this, Virginia has had slavery for over two centuries and it begins to unravel in three weeks. And this kind of placed every fear that white South has— is that we've been lying to ourselves, that our enslaved people love us, that we are like family, that they need us. At the first moment, people are going to the first allies, they can find United States army to make themselves free.

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EDWARD AYERS:

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So part of what Lincoln sees is that we have these powerful allies in the enslaved population who can be spies, who can tell us exactly which road to follow when we're mobilizing, who can help our own troops. Plus if we take them in, they will not be digging the entrenchments around Richmond anymore, that the Confederates will not be able to use them. So on one hand, the men in the field of the United States army come to know Black people for the first time and to realize the moral purpose that they have to recognize the strength of their religious belief, to recognize the resilience of their families, and to recognize how much they understand what the war is about. So that infiltrates the Union cause. At the same time, the Union comes to understand 4 million people put to work against their will to support the Confederacy, nullifies a large part of our advantage in manpower.

EDWARD AYERS:

So I think that we have to understand both the aspirations of enslaved people who are making their possibilities known to the United States at the same time that Lincoln's coming to understand just how powerful Southern slavery is and what it means to be able to command people to do work that you are having to make soldiers do. You got some young white guy from Massachusetts digging a trench, the Confederates are having enslaved people do that, right? So you have to understand that all along, Lincoln's calculating all of this, right? And part of this is, is that he does grow to understand the capacities of the enslaved people at the South in every dimension, both the capacity to save the United States, but also their own capacity for freedom. We imagine that Lincoln's growing over the war. He is because people like Frederick Douglass are coming to him and explaining, "Look the first moment, they can see a glimpse of freedom, they're risking their lives to seize it." And so I think you have to understand both the upsurge of possibility, but also the growing threat of the danger of concentrated in slave labor by the Confederacy.

**Lincoln's interpretation of the Constitution**

00:37:51:00

EDWARD AYERS:

For Lincoln, his political poles are defined by the Declaration of Independence – “all men are created equal” – which is a radical document, and the Constitution, which is in some ways a conservative document – it's built to conserve the United States, right? So he believes in both of those all along, right? And he doesn't believe the Constitution should be amended, it should be changed very much. But he also believes the Constitution was anti-slavery from the beginning. He points out, “it never says the word slavery are eloquent forefathers you're telling me that they didn't use the words that they meant to use? No, they expected it to fade away.” So that's his story. He basically has a narrative about how we came to this. And the narrative was that there was every reason to expect at the founding that slavery would fade away. What's the one act that they took about slavery to stop the international slave trade 20 years later.

EDWARD AYERS:

So he believes that he's does not change the Constitution in order to combat slavery. He's tapping, it's intrinsic latent, meaning to do all of that. And that he believes, with things like the Dred Scott decision, that the Constitution has become corroded, distorted by actions since the founding. So he wants to get back to the purpose that drove the United States at the beginning, which was to find a comity among the States, right, to create the Union. So what he thinks now is that people who are the enemies of the United States have taken control of this. He doesn't acknowledge the legitimacy of the Confederacy. He still believes that the “Slave Power” conspiracy that he and other Republicans had seen with reason for running everything in the 1850s

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are still kind of running the Confederacy. So he believes that actions against slavery are actions against an illegitimate power. It's not against the worthy purposes of Americans to do this.

## **General Butler's "contraband" policy**

00:40:07:00

EDWARD AYERS:

So the "contraband" decision comes from a general in the field. So when only three weeks had Virginia secession, these three men row across Chesapeake Bay. And when you see what that looks like today, you realize what a challenge that was. And they risked their lives, their freedom, walking up to the gates of Fort Monroe and saying, "We want to be of service to you. We need to escape from our rebel masters." And they don't know what's going to happen. There's some young Vermont boy there with a gun. And suddenly these enslaved people show up, what are you supposed to do? So he lets them talk to General Butler, who's a lawyer and has a lot of confidence and a lot of savvy. And so Butler talks to them and realizes that, "Okay, they claim that you're property, we are at war. I will claim you as property of war. Therefore you are 'contraband.'"

EDWARD AYERS:

Now looking back on it, of course, that's not the most ennobling beginning against slavery that we could have had, but it took what was available in the existing law, in the existing rules of war. And in some ways, taking the white South and in its own words. "You're saying that these men are property, great. If they are being used against the United States and rebellion, then we have the right to take them." So that opens the door. The other commanders elsewhere had thought about similar sort of thing. But this is typical – I think Butler's strategies would appeal to Lincoln because it was within the bounds

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of law and it was clever, but it advanced the purpose of opening a wedge to end slavery.

EDWARD AYERS:

So Butler on his own decides that he is going to implement this policy. And he could be overturned as it had been elsewhere on the places where United States army is confronting enslaved people, but it was not. And so within two years, you have 10,000 enslaved people who have come to Fort Monroe, Freedom's Fortress. And so by setting that precedent both locally, in which you had a place, Fort Monroe is the place where the first African people came to British North America, really hundreds of yards away you have the first decision that of the "contraband" decision that begins to use the power of the United States Army to erode the power of slaveholders. Okay. That's the beauty of this from the United States point of view is that we are only connecting the shortest line here.

EDWARD AYERS:

But the effect of it is to create a magnet that pulls enslaved people of all backgrounds to Fort Monroe, where, now we're going to have to help feed them and protect them. But they turned out, they build their own village. And that's one of the first places that the United States comes to understand the capacities of enslaved people to become freed people. Give them just protection. They will make themselves free but then you start seeing schools emerged so forth and it becomes in many ways, the opening wedge of how a war can be a way that can dissolve slavery, even as it fights against the would be nation that sustains it.

## **The shared interests of the Union and the enslaved**

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EDWARD AYERS:

Lincoln is a humane man, but he's not free from the racial prejudices of his time. He does not know what enslaved people will do in the moment of war. White Southerners say, "we know what they're going to do. They're going to protect us. They're going to stay here. They're going to be loyal to us." Of course, that becomes the story that they tell themselves for the next 150 years, right? Is that when push comes to shove, they helped hide the silver. They stayed here with their loyal masters. That's what the white South believes. Lincoln doesn't think that's going to be the case because we have seen Black abolitionists come to the North – like Frederick Douglass – how articulate and powerful and determined they are.

EDWARD AYERS:

He's seen thousands of people escaping through the Underground Railroad every year. People risking their lives to become free. He knows about Harriet Tubman. So he knows that those kinds of people exist. What's the proportion? Is the enslaved population of the Confederacy going to be of a greater assistance to the enemies of the United States, or could it be turned to advantage? And what Lincoln comes to realize is that the needs of the enslaved people and the needs of the United States army are aligned. What do enslaved people want? They want an ally for the first times in their lives to have a place to go that is not dominated by slavery and to have a place perhaps where they would be able to get food and have a place where they were able to get clothing and have their children taken care of. What's the United States Army need? The United States Army needs information. It needs support. It needs labor, but it mainly needs to weaken the Confederacy. So in order to aid enslaved people, they are directly striking a blow at the material needs of the Confederacy, but also at the psychological needs of the Confederacy.

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EDWARD AYERS:

The Confederacy needs to believe that they are not fighting a war against the interest of enslaved people. But as they tell themselves, as impossible as this seems to us today, to protect enslaved people. What they tell them all the time is “the Yankees are not your friends. They are just using you. They will put you back in slavery somewhere else. Why not stay here? You've known us your whole life. We grew up together. We'd nursed you when you were sick, we provide you clothing. You'd want to stay with us. What do you think the Yankees are going to do? Why would the Yankees wants you to be there?” Right? And so the argument that enslaved people had to make to the United States when they got there is that we're on your side. We're allies were invaluable. And by aiding us, you're hurting the enemy.

EDWARD AYERS:

So Lincoln sees this, these words, these reports come up to Washington and he begins to realize that perhaps the way to do what he took office to do, which is to save the United States, goes through ending slavery, not around ending slavery. Now, what we need to understand is that Lincoln is up against a lot of people who disagree with that, including the Democrats who see this as a complete violation of what they signed up to fight for, which is to save the United States.

EDWARD AYERS:

So here's how their argument go: “So you're telling me, Mr. Lincoln, that you've drafted my sons to go down there in Virginia or Tennessee to fight. And you're going to prolong the war by expanding its purpose to end slavery? I believe you're acting in an unconstitutional way, no matter what you say, I believe this has been your purpose all along. I believe the “Black Republicans” have been abolitionists in disguise. I believe you're listening too much to people like Frederick Douglas and Thaddeus Stevens. Other people

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whispering in your ears that this is a chance to ennoble yourself. And here's what I want. I want this war to end and I want it to end as soon as possible. And I want my boys to come home and I want taxes to stop rising through the roof. Okay?

00:47:53:00

EDWARD AYERS:

And I want you to stop aggrandizing power. You are acting in a way that the founders did not envision, which is a tyrannical president absorbing all this authority to do things like declaring the Emancipation Proclamation." So those people have power. They have weight, and he can't afford for that argument to infiltrate the Republican ranks. He needs to remember, he wins 39.6% of the vote. That's a lot of people who didn't vote for him, right? So he has to find a language. That's not the language of abolitionism, but a language of practicality. So there's a famous line that the Emancipation Proclamation has "all the moral grandeur of a bill of lading." That's on purpose. We know that Abraham Lincoln can evoke moral grandeur whenever he wants to, as he would do months later at Gettysburg. Right now, what he needs to do is show skeptics as well as supporters, that there is a necessary embrace of the end of slavery to accomplish our purposes.

## **Lincoln's faith in democracy**

00:49:08:00

EDWARD AYERS:

So Lincoln was puzzling to people at the time because there been serious doubts about his adherence to traditional Christianity. He had been criticized earlier in his life for maybe being too skeptical and you don't hear him evoking the traditional icons of Christianity the way would have been customary. So where does his moral fight against slavery comes from? It

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comes from the reason that he was elected in the first place. It's the faith in democracy, in the faith of every individual to determine, as the declaration of independence says their own pursuit, that they are all equal to have the chances, he says in his debate against Douglas, to "profit from the sweat of their own brow."

EDWARD AYERS:

So he has a moral purpose, but it is a morality based in practicality, based in politics rather than what we might think of as a philosophical or even a religious purpose behind it all. So I think that was what was confusing to people. Abolitionism – *Uncle Tom's Cabin* – infused with a Christian sensibility. That was not the language that he spoke most of the time.

## **The multiple strands of the Civil War**

00:50:26:00

EDWARD AYERS:

We're so used to thinking of the Civil War between the North and the South. That's a mistake – it's between the United States and people who were wanting to leave the United States. So even using words like Union and Confederacy kind of distort what's at stake. But it's also the case that it also is tempting to see battlefield maneuvers almost like a ball game; when you sort of have the gray team and the blue team going long or making these flanking maneuvers. But what we need to remember is that the Civil War has multiple sides. Okay? Not only does it have the North and the South, it also has the West, but most profoundly, it has African-American people who are negotiating, navigating between the Confederate States of America and the United States of America. 500,000 enslaved people come into contact with the United States army over the course of the war. That means three and a

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half million do not. So what that means is that despite our visions of what the Civil War was like – an opportunity for enslaved people – very often, they remain surrounded by pure Confederates now with guns. So in some ways it's an even more dangerous time to try to escape.

EDWARD AYERS:

So the moral complexity of enslaved people seems clear to us – they want to be free and we know they do, but the practical complexity is enormous. What do you do if you're an 18 year old woman with a one year old baby? Do you risk your life and maybe the life of your child to try to make it to the United States Army, which may or may not welcome you. Or do you stay where you are, where at least you are safe, and see what happens? I don't think any of us should judge the decisions that people made in that context, but here's what you need to think. If you think of the Civil War as three strands woven together, you have to understand what each one wants on its own. The Confederate States are the initiators of the action. If they did not secede none of the other things that we're thinking about, Abraham Lincoln, happened. They trigger the action. Lincoln is playing defense, most of the time. So even though we're used to thinking of the president being in charge, he is largely reacting to situations that are presented to him. He has a clear sense of what he's trying to do, but how he's going to do it is constantly shifting.

EDWARD AYERS:

So the Confederacy, here's what they think, "All we have to do is not lose until November 1864, in which case the white North, so weary of losing their sons and fathers, will turn against this man." So the Confederates don't believe they're going to overrun New York City. They're trying to absorb as much punishment as they can to prolong the war. That's what Robert E. Lee says when he goes into Gettysburg, he writes his wife. He says, "I'm trying to show in the next election that they cannot count on this man." So that's the

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Confederate cause – trying to hold it together long enough for the North to give up. What's the United States need to do? The United States needs to stop the rebellion as soon as it can. But increasingly over time, it realizes it can not do that and leave slavery in place. So the United States challenge gets greater and greater over time. Even though they are winning battlefield victories, the total victory seems elusive in 1864. That they're going to be able to defeat the Confederacy.

EDWARD AYERS:

All along the people who have a consistent vision of what they want, are the African-American people of the South. Who will do whatever they can to make themselves free in whatever measure they can. Those fortunate enough to find sanctuary with the United States Army, in the refugee camps that emerge along the Mississippi River and along the eastern seaboard, do so. But sometimes it's not clear who this, United States units coming through town, that they're going to stay.

00:55:04:00

EDWARD AYERS:

What do you do? Do you show that you support them and then they leave? Then you put yourself and your family at risk when the Confederates are still there? Or do you use this opportunity as we see this in the Shenandoah Valley. They follow those troops, whether the troops want them to or not. This is our only chance to be free. So there's a story I like that one Union soldier writes home about, there's a 70 some year old woman who is walking and keeping up with us because she says, "This is finally my moment of freedom." So that's what you have to understand, that everybody's negotiating all along with this constantly changing landscape of the war. The Confederates know what they want. The United States is redefining what it

wants. But Black Americans know what they want, which is to become free in whatever means they can.

### **Enslaved people's perception of the war**

00:56:05:00

EDWARD AYERS:

From the very beginning of the war, Black Southerners heard white Southerners declare that Abraham Lincoln was an abolitionist and that the United States Army was there to end slavery. Looking back on it the white South might've been more circumspect in what they said. And of course we look back on it and note that Lincoln was not an abolitionist at the beginning of the war. You see the posters of the time and they say, "Come fight your abolitionists foes." So in order to gin up the white South against the United States, they create an imagined ally of Black Southerners who grows into that role, but who was not there at the beginning. So ironically, the fact that Blacks Southerners believe that once this war begins, just as it had during the revolution, that when disruption comes it's an opportunity for slavery to dissolve. They believe the war is against slavery before anybody else does, because they're determined to make it a war against slavery in any way that they can.

### **The role of Frederick Douglass**

00:57:12:0

EDWARD AYERS:

Frederick Douglass, maybe the most famous man in America, certainly more famous than Abraham Lincoln at the time – deeply skeptical of the

Republican party. Knows its origins in the Free Soil Party – by which they mean free for white people. He says, "I don't believe the Republicans are actually fighting for our interests. They're fighting to create a white North." So he's deeply resistant to supporting the Republicans. He watches what Lincoln does; "Okay, I'm seeing the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation. I see some of these acts against slavery." By 1863, Douglass supports Lincoln and the Republicans. It's partly because he's persuaded Lincoln to support him. So it's not just that Douglass is won over by Lincoln, in many ways, Douglass' determination, and eloquence, and persistence, and the many allies and people who are flooding Washington with petitions to Lincoln and the Republicans calling for the end of slavery, and the constant agitation by the radicals. All of this is pressing on Lincoln. He's realizing that, "Well, I might be worried about the Democrats and moderate Republicans over there, but right here, the people who I've got to persuade right now, are calling me to strike a blow against slavery." So it's a great accomplishment of Douglass to not compromise his purposes, but to bring Lincoln around to understanding what's going to need to be happening. So Douglass had opposed no fighting with John Brown. It's not that Douglass is just blood-thirsty. He, like Lincoln, is shrewd. He recognizes the realities that define possibility. But what has happened, two years into the war, is that the possibilities have expanded so radically that new goals are imaginable and indeed necessary.

**Lincoln's explanation and rationalization of the war as "God's purpose"**

00:59:16:00

EDWARD AYERS:

It's hard to imagine how much suffering Lincoln felt and experienced by the letters that he received every day. You read them now, even at this distance, they're heartbreaking. He knows how much people are losing. He knows,

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having lost a son himself, what that means. And so he's not a thick-skinned guy. He's feeling all of this. So how does he explain it? He comes to believe that this is the act of providence, by which he means an unknowable God. So he doesn't proclaim that he understands God's purposes, but he comes to believe after he watches so much suffering that it must be God's purpose for that suffering to have occurred. And so he thinks then, "Okay, I'm not in charge of all of this, but my job is to make this worthwhile. It is to make sure that all the suffering has been for the purpose that it needs to be." And he comes to believe, increasingly, that it's to the end of slavery. And in his great speeches in the last two years of his life, increasingly, he turns to that rationale to explain that we are enacting a kind of penance for a national sin. And that's one of the things that makes him so surprising.

EDWARD AYERS:

You might think of all the reasons he has to hate the white South. And yet, when he has an opportunity to speak about them, he refuses to speak the language of war mongering. But instead talks about a shared responsibility for allowing slavery to take root in this land devoted to freedom. So he's religious, but not in a conventional way. He's more of the religion of the Old Testament than of the New. He has the heart of a Christian, of sympathy and of a feeling of suffering and thinking that this sacrifice must be for something. But he would not proclaim himself arrogant enough to understand God's purposes.

EDWARD AYERS:

So that's one thing that gives him this remarkable humility in the face of this. He thinks that he has responsibility to play his role, as honestly and bravely as he can, but to recognize that it's only a role in a cosmic drama that we don't fully understand yet. I think he does come to believe that, as the war proceeds and so much suffering unfolds, that it must be God's purpose to

have this redeem the sin of slavery. At the same time, that it must be God's purpose to protect the United States as a bastion of freedom in the world. So he believes both of those things. Both of which are interesting mixture of arrogance to think the only United States could do this, but on the other hand to believe that his responsibility is to make sure that this fragile hope is not destroyed in this war.

### **The evolution of Lincoln's thinking on Emancipation**

01:02:42:00

EDWARD AYERS:

Lincoln knows what he wants from the beginning which is to save the United States. Now, he does not give up on the idea that he might be able to persuade some white Southerners to come back into the United States. This is something that leaves him open to criticism from people who believe that, that's just a pipe dream. He has this dream, "If we can get 10% of white Southerners to agree, we can start building the United States back." So he wants the United States, but he's willing to be flexible on the means of that. On slavery, he comes to believe that not only emancipation, but the mobilization of Black people to help deliver their own freedom. And, as it turns out, to save the United States, is what God has in mind and what must unfold. So on one hand, he's a fixity of purpose, to save United States, and using whatever means it will do that. On the other hand, his dreams of restoring full freedom to enslaved people is constantly evolving and growing. So you have those two things. I think over the course of the war, he comes to realize that the salvation of the United States is going to come in a thorough defeat of the Confederacy, and a thorough eradication of slavery. That is the thing, he begins by thinking both of those things might be able to be trimmed, compromised. You might be able to have a slow evolution of emancipation.

You might be able to bring in, especially the most literate Black men, to have them have some political power. We might be able to negotiate with the South in some way, to a belief over time that he was not going to compromise on either of those purposes.

### **The principal message of the Gettysburg Address**

01:04:38:00

EDWARD AYERS:

I think in the Gettysburg Address, Lincoln is trying to remind Americans what's at stake. And what's at stake is the mission of the United States and world history. Now he uses, generally, a secular language for this. And he doesn't mention the word slavery. So some people have said, "Well, he's evasive. That's not really what he's talking about." What he's doing is fusing the idea that freedom for some people must be freedom for all people. So he is elevating the story of the war and showing how, "four score and seven years ago," it's the fulfillment of the original vision of this nation; that this is not a divergence from what the founding fathers had in mind – it's the culmination of what they started. So that's how in just 200 and some words he is trying to convey that. He talks about slavery, nearby in other speeches. It's not that he's avoiding it. But he recognizes right then what is the great common denominator that's uniting these two purposes of the war to save the United States forever, and to end slavery, it is the dream of freedom. So Lincoln recognizes that the original constitution did not deal with slavery as it should have. Now in the crucible of war, they have a chance to rebirth the constitution with a fuller freedom, without betraying its purposes, instead to fulfill its purposes. So he does see the war as being a critical moment in the unfolding story that began with the founding. And I think he maybe even thinks that it's not so much as a flaw at the founding, it's that they did what

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they could, but now we can complete the story. Lincoln believes not so much that the Constitution was flawed from the beginning, but that it was intrinsically about freedom. It's the opportunity of this generation, of the men he's consecrating all around him, to deliver that freedom that was promised at the beginning.

## **The 1864 election**

01:06:55:00

EDWARD AYERS:

Now looking back on it, we know how the war turned out and we know that Abraham Lincoln won. It's hard to imagine that in August of 1864, he does not think he's going to win. August! So how could that be? What could change? Now this is where we need to recognize that the events on the battlefield are fundamentally political. And that politics are also related to the events on the battlefield. So what happens? Well, think about it, in the summer of '64, Sherman has been stopped outside of Atlanta for a long time. And it feels as like, "Is this ever going to fall?" Closer to home, really within almost shouting distance of the White House, the Shenandoah Valley is still in the hands of the Confederates. Think about that. That close to Washington with an enormous power and the enormous sacrifice that's been expended, the Shenandoah Valley is still in the control of the Confederates. So you've got both those things going on that seemed to be a rebuke to Lincoln's entire purpose.

EDWARD AYERS:

The Democrats say, "You have taxed us to death. You have taken our young men. You have..." As they see it, "... trampled on the Constitution. You have destroyed untold farms and property in the South – and you haven't even

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won yet. It's time to quit. It's time to recognize that this war was just in its purposes to save the United States, but that you, Mr. President, have polluted that purpose by dragging slavery into it. So here's what we, the Democrats, think; the war should be negotiated to an end. We're going to set aside slavery. We'll meet with the Confederates and we'll stop all this suffering." Now here's the fact two, 45% of white Northern men are Democrats. It's amazing to think that in the election of 1860, Lincoln persuades 1% of those men to change to the Republican party. So we're used today to polarization and how dug in people are. Here with the greatest president in American history, and all the accomplishments of the United States, and the promise of freedom so close at hand, that those Democrats are not willing to vote for Abraham Lincoln. Not only that, they see him as incompetent, dishonest, corrupt – a puppet is the way he's often presented, at the hands of the radical left of the radical Republicans.

01:09:53:00

EDWARD AYERS:

So how does he win? Two ways: one, Sherman takes Atlanta; two, Sheridan takes Shenandoah Valley. In October, we talk about October surprises. Think about that. Okay. The other thing that happens is that the men who have been fighting for the United States, to save the United States, have come to believe that they are fighting for a noble cause. And that it would be a moral failure to back away from that cause when they are so close to victory. And they have come to respect and admire Abraham Lincoln as their leader. So it's remarkable that even during the war, that soldiers are going to be permitted to vote, and that when they do vote, there are very few irregularities. But what does happen is that very many of them vote for Abraham Lincoln. Now the Democrats say, "Well, yeah, you got their officers pressing them into that and pushing them into that." Historians are still arguing over the extent of that. But the fact is, and it's also, it seems to be a little shady that sometimes

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Lincoln is bringing troops home in Pennsylvania so that they can vote. But it's an election, right? And so you go from August of '64, Lincoln thinking he's going to lose to you add up all of that, and the Democrats do a terrible job. George McClellan is saddled with a far more submissionist platform than he would have chosen.

EDWARD AYERS:

Many people think, "Isn't it inappropriate for a general in our army to be running against the commander in chief." So a lot of the soldiers in the field think that McClellan, even though they've loved him before, is acting inappropriately. And so through that concatenation of all those things, Lincoln does win a rousing victory in 1864. And that gives him the political capital to do the things that he needs to do to end slavery and to end the war. But we should not forget how fortunate the United States was that George McClellan did not become president of the United States. We cannot know what the future of slavery would have been, but to have prolonged it, even a day, to have kept more people in bondage, separated from their families, bought and sold, would have been a tragedy.

## **Lincoln's political calculus of the 13th Amendment**

01:12:38:00

EDWARD AYERS:

Lincoln recognizes that with his great veneration for the Constitution, that the Emancipation Proclamation does not end slavery with the finality and inclusivity that it must. He wants slavery to be wrong everywhere in the United States. He recognizes that places like Maryland, Kentucky that had been under United States control, slavery is still there. And these slaveholders are not giving up. So he needs to get the 13th Amendment passed before the war ends. Now that seems strange to us to think about that,

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because when the war ends and the Southern states come back into the United States, as he hopes, then he may not be able to get the 13th amendment through. So by the time that he's seeing it through, you've got a lame duck Congress. And you've got people who he's able to persuade, who are Democrats, who would have voted against it before, to go ahead and support it. And then... so this is part of the story in which Republicans are seen as corrupt. What he is saying is that, "I need to get this done, now, so that we can have the states ratify it. And that slavery will never have a chance to be re-instituted in America." So we're making a false distinction. If we think that to do anything political is to compromise morality. Lincoln's great accomplishment was to steer through this political morass, to mobilize the white North enough, not to give up. That is his great accomplishment. He's able to mobilize around an expanded purpose, but to see it through, when after four years, so many people had reasons to say, "That's enough."

So if you had told Abraham Lincoln, in 1860, what he was going to be doing in 1865, he would hardly have believed it. "You're going to oversee an Amendment to your beloved Constitution that will end slavery." I think he would have thought that was impossible. And in fact, the Civil War, as it occurred, was impossible. It was impossible for the largest, most powerful system of slavery in the modern world, worth more than all the banks, and railroads, and factories of the North combined, the largest economic interest in the nation, to be destroyed in four years. Without compensation to the slaveholders. That could not have happened. But it did because Abraham Lincoln was able to marry political purpose, and military purpose, and moral purpose in a way that required great skill at each of those media. And so that's what happened, is that Lincoln went farther than he thought was possible. And maybe even farther than he thought was inscribed in the Constitution, in order to fulfill the spirit of the Constitution. So I don't think he had any regrets, but he would have recognized that maybe providence

must have been at work for us to have made such a transformation in such a short period of time.

### **The evolving legacy of Lincoln**

01:16:01:00

EDWARD AYERS:

Lincoln's reputation, his understanding, has vacillated wildly over generations. But in many ways it was seared into the American consciousness with his assassination. There's a strange alchemy on that. Obviously the people who believed that the end of slavery was a great purpose of the war, celebrated Lincoln. Obviously too, the people who saw the preservation of the United States, celebrated Lincoln. What's surprising, in some ways, is that over time, white Southerners came to believe that Lincoln was a great man. It was what happened after his death, in some ways, that made that happen because they certainly hated him at the time he was killed. What happened was "Radical Reconstruction." Lincoln never used those phrases. Matter of fact, his last words were something much like, "I'm thinking about what we might do now. I will be back to you soon." And it's open-ended. So people have imagined that he would have used this great moral capacity for understanding and generosity, that we hear in the second inaugural, that he would have not taken the South through Reconstruction.

EDWARD AYERS:

We don't know, but by being followed by Andrew Johnson, and then being followed by the radical Republicans and radical reconstructions – even white Southerners often romanticized Abraham Lincoln and forgot what they'd said about him just months before. So it's a kind of a triangulation.

EDWARD AYERS:

Black Southerners had complicated ideas as well. Being told that he was the "great emancipator," belying all the risks of life that they had made to free themselves. And not only that, but to save the United States has been an unstable identity. There's an admiration for him, but a sense that he's too much of a coherent symbol for white America – that it's white America saving Black America and they know that it's just not the case. So it always feels as if, "Now we figured out Abraham Lincoln. That now we've got all the pieces in place." I think that his identity will always change, as different facets of his accomplishments are seen in a lot of our own time.

### **Historical perspective on Lincoln's achievements**

01:18:36:00

EDWARD AYERS:

So as a professional historian, we're skeptical of everything. "Let's look at the evidence." And we certainly see, if you live enough in the 19th century America, you see enough wrong and injustice to recognize it when you see it. But the more you understand Abraham Lincoln, and why he made the decisions that he made, when he made them, the greater your respect for him is. I think if we... Frederick Douglass says, "Measured and on the scale of the greatest abolitionist, he's deeply wanting. But measured by the scale of what was possible..." As I like to think of it, "... of what he was up against. Then I think his achievement only grows."

### **Black Americans' deeper understanding of freedom**

01:19:22:00

EDWARD AYERS:

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The most eloquent testimony of what Black Southerners and slavery wanted was the way they acted, the ways that they would seize upon any opportunity to make themselves free and to gain freedom for their families. Right? So the eloquence of escape and of aid to the United States and of words of effrontery, to the people who claim that own them are very clear, right? And so it's... They said over and over again, "We deserve to be free. We want to be free. It's been an injustice that we've not been free." Okay. So we have that. We also have the letters that Black soldiers wrote about why they are fighting, and one of my favorites, he says, "I'm fighting so that our children hereafter will be free." So think about this. Black Northerners enlisting in such numbers to fight for the freedom of people they've never seen in a country that has mistreated them every day of their lives.

EDWARD AYERS:

Where does the love of the United States come from in a country that has been so unjust? It comes from the recognition, as Lincoln had, that intrinsic in the founding documents is the idea that we all are equal, that we are destined to be free. So, many ways, Black Americans, Northern and Southern, enslaved and free, are helping the United States live up to what it actually proclaimed at its founding.

EDWARD AYERS:

I think this is one of the things that was surprising, certainly to white Southerners, is that there had been a kind of Black politics, all under slavery all along. That Black people knew what freedom meant. They knew it was being deprived of them. They knew what it would mean to be a citizen. They knew the responsibilities. And one of the great things about American history is how quickly people who've been held in slavery their entire lives mobilized only two years after slavery to vote, to hold office, and to speak more eloquently than most white people about what the founding ideals of

America are. So, we have ample opportunity in lots of different media, as the war sort of takes the lid off Black people being able to say and do what they believe in, and consistently what they believe in is the determination to be free.

### **Reactions to Lincoln's assassination**

01:22:01:00

EDWARD AYERS:

Because of the delays in news at the time, if you lived in a town, like most people did, with a weekly newspaper, you might've gotten news of Appomattox and of Lincoln's assassination at the same time. And the mixed emotions of relief that your sons are coming home, that your father is going to come home, mixed with the agony, really, of thinking that the person who finally delivered this salvation has been killed, you know? And so it's not as if there was enough time to really separate out the two. And I think that's one of the things that helps account for that degree, the understanding of martyrdom. It's almost as if he was killed in the war, right? That the two merged together. It seemed that he, as he had painfully overseen the sacrifice of so many other lives, sacrificed his own life.

EDWARD AYERS:

So I think that people also would have been afraid. You know? What's going to hold the United States together now? Who's this Andrew Johnson guy? It's a long time now till the next presidential election. What's going to happen? And, of course, if you're a Black Southerner and you look at this and you think, "Wow, the person who's actually steered the United States toward this unlikely outcome is gone. Now will that be taken away?"

EDWARD AYERS:

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White Southerners think that this guy who's been the enemy for so long, "Maybe now with this Andrew Johnson guy, a Southerner, maybe we'll have a chance to get back some of what we've lost." So, what you see is a scramble, as soon as Lincoln is assassinated to define what the war actually meant. It's not all settled in April of 1865. Its consequences are going to play out, well, until the present day, but in a very immediate sense for the next twelve years, all during Reconstruction. Some people would have seen it as an opportunity, some people would've seen it as a great tragedy, and some people would've seen it as a reason for great caution.

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