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JOHN STAUFFER
LINCOLN'S DILEMMA
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

John Stauffer Interview
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CREW MEMBERS:

Crosstalk

Lincoln's upbringing

01:00:09:18

JOHN STAUFFER:

So, Lincoln's rough and tumble background was important because it helped him, in essence, become a leader. He grew up in backwoods. He had less than a year of formal education. He learned to read and write by reading the same five, six books. He was an obsessive reader and he was also blessed with being very tall, big and strong at a time in which fighting was a pastime and a kind of art form. And he needed to know how to defend himself. So, he was very big, very strong. In fact, both Douglass and Lincoln, in essence, defined a fight as a turning point in their careers, in which they defeated an enemy in physical combat. For Douglass it was the sadistic slave owner, Edward Covey. For Lincoln it was Jack Armstrong.

Lincoln grew up in these backwoods communities in which fighting was an art form. It was one of the few forms of entertainment, and it could be brutal.

Lincoln's strength, his height benefited him greatly as it did Douglass. Lincoln was 6'4" in his bare feet, as he would later say. And the average height of men at that time was about 5'6". So, that gives you a sense of how much Lincoln towered over the average man. Douglass was roughly 6'1" or so. So, both were very big, strong men and that benefited them. So, to be a leader, one needed to be able, especially in the communities in which they lived, and Douglass as an African-American, you had to be able to defend yourself, not just with the words, but, when it came down to it, with your muscles.

Lincoln was immensely curious. He fell in love with reading, and it was the age before common schools, and he essentially recognized the power that literacy provided. He read continually, in fact his father at times beat him when he was supposed to be farming and he wanted to read. It was one of the ways in which one could rise up. And we don't know whether it was this natural or innate inclination for reading and for literacy, but the fact is that in my view, Lincoln was, as a non-fiction writer, one of the best non-fiction writers in the United States by the time he was a politician and adult. He had the capacity to, as a political writer, to write some immensely powerful prose. He had a source of humor, which is important, was very good. He's the kind of writer who still surprises people, and that's hard to do. And, let's face it, Lincoln grew up, it was the golden age of elocution, in which speaking and writing were one of the few forms of entertainment, especially public speaking. And so Lincoln cut his eye teeth on becoming an orator. It was that era before the rise of formal sports and other activities in which you could become a public person. So, if you were ambitious, if you wanted to become a leader, it was crucially important to master language and to be a good public speaker and writer.

How is it that Lincoln does not become coarsened, given the brutal rough environment and distant father that he had? I think one reason is, it's one of the virtues of reading, of literacy. Part of the power of reading a book, or listening to a story, is the capacity to empathize. To empathize with the plight of other people. Even someone whom you might perceive to be an enemy, to be able to put yourself in the position, to imagine yourself in the position of someone else. To imagine why someone else might think that they feel threatened by you actually helps to disarm the desire for revenge or the desire for not wanting to build friends and a community.

So, I could go on I think that's one reason. Another reason was both his mother and stepmother really recognized Lincoln's passion for reading and they encouraged it, even though, at this time, his father was the leader, so to speak, of the household. But they cultivated Lincoln's passion for books.

Lincoln's melancholy

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Stauffer:

I think the melancholy that he suffered and that plagued him on and off did serve as an important generative source to be able to imagine a better different world, to be able to reconcile differences with people who had been his enemy. And you see that both then and now there are numerous instances of melancholy being a catalyst for generation or regeneration. And that's actually now recognized in medical literature. So, it's not just a wild fantasy. That's now been documented and researched.

Slave narratives and literacy

01:06:50:22

Stauffer:

There are a number of ways to obtain an accurate, virtually firsthand representation of slavery, and that is from the slave narratives. Douglass wrote two of them, two best-selling slave narratives. There were slave narratives written by women, by men. Now, these slave narratives are written by slaves who escape and achieve freedom. The vast majority of slaves are in the Gulf states and the deep states. Douglass is born a slave in Maryland. It's much easier to reach free soil if you're from Maryland than it is if you're from Mississippi. It's much harder for Mississippi.

But we now know – and this is scholarship only in the past 10 years or so – one, is that because slavery is a state of war, slavery is also what I've called a totalitarian state. In the slave states, slaves are prohibited from reading and writing, because slave owners recognize that if you give slaves literacy, they can not only write passes for themselves, it gives them power. Literacy is power. And yet, despite the fact that it was, and Douglass highlights this in his slave narratives, despite this fact, up to, according to scholars, roughly ten percent or more of slaves became literate of their own accord. Reading, learning to read and write, grabbing a newspaper, anything they could.

“The Grapevine Telegraph”

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Stauffer:

The metaphor of the grapevine telegraph was used widely to disseminate news from one plantation to another. We now know that virtually every slave rebelled and escaped. In fact, most slaves fled their plantation, often they would just go to another plantation. There were slave, there were maroon communities and areas that where they could be protected from slave patrols. But the literacy and their speeches, their writings, both published writing, the way in which they telegraphed their oral words to each other along this, I think the grapevine telegraph is a wonderful phrase. It's how and why they become such a tight community. And you see it in the war, especially, is that slaves know they have a much better sense, from one plantation to the next, where the armies are, what the strategies, which is why Grant and so many other generals come to rely very heavily on slaves as sources of intelligence.

Early abolitionism

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Stauffer:

In the 1830s, abolitionists were seen as a despised tiny minority by the vast majority of white Americans. The abolition movement begins during the revolutionary period by former slaves, free Blacks who speak out against slavery, who use their voice. The best way to understand abolitionism is the ability to disseminate one's voice about the horrors of slavery, the degree to which it's inhumane and an attempt to dehumanize other humans. And the abolitionists constituted less than two percent or so of the population. And it's important to understand the distinction between abolitionists and anti-slavery advocates. And that distinction becomes clarified by the 1830s, and abolitionists advocated an immediate end to slavery and advocated, in theory, racial equality. Anti-slavery advocates

believed slavery was a horrible evil, a horrible social, economic and political evil, but advocated for a very gradual end to slavery, so as not to uproot the existing social order. In the 1830s anti-slavery advocates were accepted. They were tolerated. They come to be mainstream by the 1850s, but abolitionists prompted mob attacks throughout the North. So, in fact, Lincoln refers to the murder of Elijah Lovejoy, this Illinois abolitionist, who creates an abolitionist press, and mobs feel so threatened, white mobs feel so threatened, that they throw his press into a river. He creates a new printing press and it happens four times. And Elijah Lovejoy then tries to defend his home and his press with a gun and he's murdered. And William Lloyd Garrison came close to being murdered in Boston in 1835. In upstate New York, another abolition center, there was a mob attack against abolitionists. They were seen as profound extremists that threatened the existing order of the United States in which the vast majority of white Americans believed, essentially, that the United States was a white man's democracy.

In the 1830s, the Northerners see slavery as limited to the Southern states. They're beginning to be fearful of the Southern states wanting to expand slavery. The Missouri Compromise highlights this rift between the sections. So, 1830s was the time when Northerners and Southerners start to define themselves in those terms. The sectional crisis essentially becomes clarified following the Missouri Compromise of 1821. And by the 1830s most Northerners are proud of defining where they live as free societies.

Most white Northerners do not like Blacks. They dislike slavery, even if they don't speak out against it, but they hate the idea of free Blacks living in their community. So, racism is a profound factor, and very few of them are abolitionists recognizing the horrors of slavery and really trying to expand the idea of American democracy to include African-Americans or other non-whites for that matter.

Lincoln's early opinion of slavery

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Stauffer:

So, Lincoln in Illinois, in the 1830s, starting his political career, he hates slavery. A consistent theme throughout his writings is that he said he hated slavery as much as any abolitionist. But his solution to ending slavery was conservative. For almost his entire life, he recognized that ending slavery was a major problem, a major obstacle, but for most of his life, he advocated colonization. The way to end slavery is to colonize free Blacks into another country, especially, whether it was Liberia or someplace outside of the United States. He justified it because he recognized racism.

It's important to recognize that Illinois was a very racist state. The midwestern states, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, most whites who settled in Illinois, like Lincoln himself, had come from a slave state. They were poor, they didn't want to compete with slave labor, which is why they went to a free state. They hated slavery, but they also hated Blacks. They hated the idea of competing with Blacks. And in fact in Illinois when Lincoln begins his career as a lawyer, there were laws in the state that technically meant that African-American in Illinois could be kicked out of the state within 24 hours. They were not allowed to be citizens within that state. So, there was a safety valve in the state laws, allowing the state to kick an African-American out of the state within 24 hours, if they were seen as suspicious or were not liked. Now there were roughly 200 or so African-Americans in Springfield when Lincoln moves to Springfield, and Lincoln got to know a number of them, but legally they did not enjoy the rights of whites.

There's a lot of debate on Lincoln's attitude about race, but Lincoln was ... once he becomes a lawyer and then when – most of his adult career, he was an Illinois politician. He was, first and foremost, a lawyer and politician. Second, he was a reformer. And Lincoln, and

everyone else in Illinois, recognized that if you advocate abolitionism, that's the end of your political career. The end of it. There's no way you can serve in office in Illinois, if you advocate abolitionism, if you advocate an immediate end to slavery, and the idea of racial equality. So, Lincoln defines himself as a leader, as a politician, as a lawyer, he's also an intellectual, but he recognizes the costs of becoming an abolitionist or speaking out against the racist laws in his state.

Elijah Lovejoy

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Stauffer:

So, Elijah Lovejoy is an abolitionist in Alton, Illinois. And he starts a printing press to publish an abolitionist newspaper. And that was seen as so threatening to white neighbors, that they attacked his home and threw his printing press into the nearby river or stream. And Elijah Lovejoy then raised money to obtain a second printing press. They destroyed that printing press. He goes in increasing amounts of debt to try to sustain a press, creates a third press. It gets dumped in the stream. Finally, Elijah Lovejoy, like abolitionists at this time in the 30s, almost all of them were pacifists. It was a defining aspect of American anti-slavery society. And the reason they were pacifists is because abolitionists recognized that violence is the crux of slavery. Without violence or the threat of violence slavery doesn't exist. In essence, abolitionists recognize that slavery is a state of war. Slavery is warfare.

And so Elijah Lovejoy had been a pacifist, but because he's in so much debt and wanting to continue to publish and circulate his press, he defends himself with a gun and he's murdered. And Lincoln refers to Lovejoy's murder in his Young Men's Lyceum address. It's

the first, I think a brilliant address. It's Lincoln delivering an address in Springfield about the idea of, really, democracy and the relationship between the Constitution and the Declaration and worries about the vigilante violence that's occurring. And so he refers to the Lovejoy murder as one example of this vigilante violence that is anti-democratic because it's people taking the law into their own hands. He refers to a number of other incidences of vigilante violence. Some anti-slavery, some pro-slavery. And so the larger point he makes is he is deeply worried about the spread of vigilante violence, of individuals taking the law into their own hands and ignoring the constitutional law. And his larger point in that address is that the Constitution should become the political religion for Americans, that he's worried about this new experiment in democracy unraveling because of vigilante violence.

So, Lincoln does defend slavery. It's a great question of whether he is more concerned with vigilante violence or with slavery. Lincoln also recognized, however, that in many respects slavery and the slave system in the South was itself a form of vigilante violence. A central distinction between the slave states and the free states is that the center of authority in the slave states was less the state laws or national laws, but primarily the law of the master, the owner of that property who owned slaves. Slave owners believed that the state and the federal government could not interfere with master's rule over his slaves, which meant that, in practice, it was not at all uncommon for masters, whether themselves or through their overseers, murdered slaves. Most of the slave states had laws, criminalizing the slaves being murdered. It was almost never legislated, never taken to court.

So, masters with impunity could murder their slaves. So, in a sense, it's hard to separate Lincoln's fear of vigilante violence and his hatred of slavery, because he recognized that slavery as it existed in the South was in itself a form of vigilante violence, because he recognized that violence was at the crux and the heart of slavery.

Lincoln's strategy for slavery's extinction

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Stauffer:

The Constitution is a problem for Lincoln because of its contradiction. On the one hand, it celebrates the idea of freedom. And in fact, the Constitution is written to secure the blessings of freedom. That's in the preamble. On the other hand, there are numerous protections for slavery. Although the term slave, slavery and Negro is not used, there are numerous protections for slavery. And so that becomes a major problem for a politician wanting and hoping to end slavery.

Lincoln's general approach to solving the constitutional dilemma of slavery is to ... he believes that slavery in a state has legitimate sanction, that slavery can only be sanctioned by a state, but in territories, the territories are under the jurisdiction of the federal government and the federal government has the authority to prohibit the spread of slavery into those territories.

So, Lincoln's larger aim is to restrict the spread of slavery as the United States continues to expand. And Lincoln also recognized that every year there are thousands, tens of thousands of mostly European immigrants coming to the United States. They're settling primarily in the free states of the North, because they don't want to compete with free labor. So the population of the North continues to grow that over time, the free states and the representation of the free states will so overpower the representation of the South that, constitutionally, the country can vote to end slavery.

And Lincoln in the 1850s believes that this will happen over a long period of time. Very gradually, in this sense, he borrows from the founding fathers and the first generation of white abolitionists in the post revolutionary period. The Northern states, almost all of the

Northern states abolished slavery very gradually. It was over 20, 30, 40 years is when slavery ended in New York State and in most of the other Northern states. Lincoln when pressed in his debates with Stephen Douglas in 1858, Douglas said, "When do you imagine the ultimate extinction of slavery?" Lincoln said, "Not less than 100 years." But for Lincoln and for many other anti-slavery advocates, what was important was that trajectory, as long as the United States was rising morally and on a trajectory toward ultimate extinction, that's what mattered. That eventually at some point slavery would be abolished. It would be the end.

Slavery: a totalitarian state

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Stauffer:

I mean, it's one of the things that Black and white abolitionists highlighted: that slavery was a state of war. Slavery was a totalitarian state. That's the best way to summarize it. It was not only dependent upon violence, but in every slave state freedoms of speech, petition, debate, civil liberties were thrown out the window. Because if you give slaves the civil liberties and free speech, they're going to describe exactly what slavery is like. And that's going to be a death knell for slavery.

And so Lincoln recognized that on the one hand and he refused to do anything about it. It was very easy to read newspapers. There were enough abolitionist papers that detailed the horrors, the sadism, the absolute cruelty of slavery. The way that I would compare slavery in the Southern states or slave society – the South was a slave society, so had been the Caribbean and Brazil, et cetera – think of Nazi Germany, think of the Russian Gulag. That's

how bad it was, that people were absolutely denied a public voice. They were denied their basic, essential humanity. And it's codified in slavery because of – it's a property. People are legally chattels. They are things.

Lincoln's tolerance for slavery

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Stauffer:

Lincoln was... a central part of his identity was a politician. He was a Whig politician. He loved Henry Clay and Clay's vision for ending slavery was to, first of all, modernize the country. Clay was a slave owner. And so, yeah, one could and should be very critical of Lincoln. But in my view, the reason why Lincoln was as conservative as he was in his anti-slavery views is that essentially he, what was more important to him, was his identity as a politician, than his identity as an activist.

And he felt that ultimately change, social change, political change could happen more effectively through political action than through activism. But, in order to embrace that one had to ignore the horrors, the inhumanity that was happening with slavery, and in Illinois, just not very far away. And that was something that Lincoln, in his writings, never really grapples at length with that. There are a few instances. When he goes down to New Orleans, where he sees, he witnesses slaves firsthand. In some cases he refers, he writes about slaves as being comparatively well-treated. In other instances, he recognizes the horrors, but he doesn't dwell on it. It's not something that he dwells on.

So I mean, Joshua Speed is Lincoln's closest friend. He spends time at Speed's plantation and sees slaves on the plantation, comes back, on his way back he sees these slaves. And so that's another reason why Lincoln does nothing. He essentially says it's in God's hands, that

God is in part responsible for the existence of the slavery, and it will, in God's own time, there will be a solution.

And that was a very common, liberal, Northern anti-slavery perspective. Yeah, "Hey, it's not my problem. And God will take care of it at some future date, but it's just not something that I'm able to do." And that makes you feel good. On the one hand, you recognize the inhumanity, the horror, the sadism that is part of slavery. On the other hand, you can say, "Well, I'm a person of faith. I believe in a God." And the vast majority of Americans did, in my view Lincoln did, although there's a debate on this. And so it's easy to say "We'll let God take care of it."

Lincoln's years as a lawyer

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Stauffer:

I think the years that Lincoln focused on his law career were important. One, he gains a lot more respect and power and sophistication as a lawyer. He experiences numerous different law cases, some that relate, in effect, you could call them pro-slavery, some anti-slavery, or some with corporations, with the new railroads. And Lincoln loved analytical work. I mean, he had a brilliant analytical mind. And so that career where he is a full time lawyer representing some very difficult cases was intellectually and thus politically a real growing period.

He also becomes not wealthy, but the equivalent of, let's say, upper middle class today. And that gives him, particularly for someone who grew up with nothing – I mean, he was known as poor white trash. That's where his family came from. There's a degree of, a growing degree of confidence of pride and his ability to think that he could become not just a, a state

politician, a politician known only in the state, but someone who could become a national figure.

And also in, as a lawyer, part of law is being, is rhetoric, is eloquence. So he was able to hone his public speaking skills. And during the time he was a lawyer he also had essentially left it to God or destiny, hoping that anti-slavery would gradually increase. And the Kansas-Nebraska Act famously, Lincoln said, lifted me off his feet. And that's when he devotes the rest of his life to anti-slavery essentially.

The Kansas-Nebraska Act

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Stauffer:

So the Kansas-Nebraska Act repeals the Missouri Compromise, which, the Missouri Compromise was one of the many compromises, really, to prevent the Southern states from seceding. The trump card for the South was always, if we don't get away with slavery, we're leaving. And because of that, this attitude of the Union was, as Lincoln would say in his first inaugural address, it was almost a mystical, a religious idea.

And so the Missouri Compromise was when Missouri seeks to enter the Union as a slave state. Initially, there're huge objections to it. And Southerners say if Missouri doesn't, if we can't have Missouri as a slave state, we're leaving. And so it took over a year for a

compromise to be implemented. And a central aspect of the Missouri Compromise is that from Missouri... Missouri enters as a slave state, Maine enters as a free state. From that point forward until the Kansas-Nebraska Act, every state enters the Union in pairs: one free, one slave, so as not to imbalance slavery in the federal government. And the Southern border of Missouri, the 36.30 parallel, is the line above which the territories that become states must be free states, below that line is the only place where the territories could enter as slave states. So it provides... It limits the spread of slavery. And Lincoln felt confident in that limiting line, that progress would occur gradually over a hundred years or so.

And the Kansas-Nebraska act repudiates the Missouri Compromise and essentially opens all of the territories to slavery. And now the territories have greatly expanded because of the Mexican war. Essentially the Mexican war was waged primarily by Southerners to acquire more territory for slavery. And that horrifies Lincoln, and Lincoln recognizes that, in a sense, what he had imagined to be progress toward the anti-slavery, progress toward eventual, ultimate extinction, the Kansas-Nebraska Act threatened. Now the line of progress was starting to decline. Now there's started to be declension, and that's where it lifts him off his feet.

The emergence of the Republican Party

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Stauffer:

The Kansas-Nebraska Act also creates, helps to create, virtually creates the Republican Party. Before the Kansas-Nebraska Act, there had been two abolition or anti-slavery parties. The Liberty Party, which is founded in 1840, was a true abolitionist party. It advocated not

just preventing the spread of slavery, but it advocated an end to slavery. And then in 1848, after the Mexican War, the Liberty Party evolved into two branches, the Free-Soil Party, which was anti-slavery, meaning advocating prohibiting the spread of slavery, but not calling for the abolition of slavery. And the National Liberty Party, which was truly revolutionary, advocating an immediate end to slavery, using violence if necessary, and not sanctioning slavery anywhere, and had, understandably, only a few thousand members.

But the importance of the National Liberty Party, and then in 1854, after the Kansas-Nebraska act, the Free-Soil Party, grows dramatically into the Republican Party. The radical wing of the Republican party is the Radical Abolition Party, which is like the National Liberty Party. The Republican Party is crucially important, because it's now the first national party in which anti-slavery is the central platform. And that's a huge deal. The Free-Soil Party was still so small that it didn't have national reach. The Whig party dissolves because the Whigs were trying to form alliances with Southerners. So the Whig Party was very, very mildly anti-slavery, but they never publicly mentioned it. There's a debate among scholars, but Henry Clay... I mean, so one of the ways in which the Whig party was mildly anti-slavery, the Whig party championed internal improvements, essentially modernizing the country, creating roads, canals, so that people could transact business in the free labor.

Lincoln's reverence for free labor

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Stauffer:

The Whig party was a champion of free labor. And it's a theme that was very closely connected to Lincoln's anti-slavery view. He believed, and he said this in the beginning, in the 18, right after the Kansas Nebraska Act, he said, "I believe that every person, even Black

women, have the right to receive the fruits of their own labor." What Lincoln means is that it's an artisanal world. Most artisans were farmers, that if you work hard, you acquire a skill, you become a farmer or a seamstress, or a cooper, or a blacksmith, or a journalist or a lawyer. You can receive the fruits of your own labor. And that should be made available to every man, woman, Black and white.

It goes right back to his own childhood and his struggle up. And it's part and parcel of his profound passion for reading, for writing, is that, that is a way to be able to receive the fruits of one's own labor. And essentially for Lincoln, as a politician, as a lawyer, as a president, the most powerful weapon that he had were words.

The Dred Scott decision

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Stauffer:

The Dred Scott decision was the most outrageous Supreme Court decision in American history. It was 1857, and it was, in fact, that James Buchanan, unconstitutionally because of the separation of powers, encouraged the Court to legislate, to interpret slavery in a way that would resolve this crisis over slavery once and for all. The Dred Scott decision was based upon a slave, Dred Scott from Missouri, who was taken by his master to a free territory and a free state for over 10 years, returns to Missouri. Abolitionists, anti-slavery advocates in Missouri realized that Dred Scott had been in these free territories, and they sued, they brought suit for his freedom because he had been in a free soil. And so they said they he's no longer a slave.

It moves up the court and reaches the Supreme Court. And it's a pro slavery, pro southern court. Roger Taney, the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, famously says that, well, first the

Court declares that Dred Scott will remain a slave. And the justification is that Taney, one, says that it is unconstitutional to prohibit the spread of slavery anywhere. Which essentially is saying the Supreme Court is calling the central platform of the Republican Party unconstitutional. That was the basic platform. The anti-slavery foundation, the Republican Party, is to prohibit the spread of slavery into territories. And that will lead to ultimate extinction. Dred Scott says that's unconstitutional. And then Taney goes further and probably the most outrageous of the three prongs of the Dred Scott decision, is, he said that, "Blacks have no rights that a white man is bound to respect." And so essentially he's saying that Blacks can never be and have never been citizens. That literally opens the way for Southern states to pass laws, authorizing the enslavement of free Blacks in that state. And Taney's essentially saying there's no way that Blacks could ever be and have ever been and could be citizens.

And the third prong of the Dred Scott decision was what most horrified Lincoln. And that relates to the law of transit. So the best way to describe it, I'm a Mississippi master who owned slaves. I bring my slaves to the state of Illinois. I bring my property to Illinois. What's the status of my property while I'm in Illinois. And Taney says, as long as you retain legal domicile in Mississippi, it's still your property.

And Lincoln and everyone recognizes that this law of transit now opens the entire nation to slavery. And in fact, Lincoln famously says in his house divided speech that we'll lie down in Illinois thinking that maybe slavery will be abolished in Missouri or another border state. And we'll wake up with slavery in Illinois and all the Northern states. And the Dred Scott decision, essentially it opens the way for a Mississippi master to go to Boston and sell his slaves at auction. Or to go to Chicago, Illinois, and to create a factory with slave labor. It really does legally open the way for slavery throughout the country. And it also, it profoundly de-legitimizes the significance of the Supreme Court. Lincoln just thumbs his

nose at it, saying that, "You're wrong." Most other anti-slavery Northerners say the same thing.

So the Dred Scott decision profoundly alienates Northerners because the Supreme Court is now on the side, fervently on the side, of radical pro-slavery Southerners. And now most Northerners are so horrified about the specter of slavery expanding into these free states through the law of transit that they're willing to ignore the Supreme Court. It divides the nation along sectional lines so much so that many scholars over the past 100 years have said or have suggested that after the Dred Scott decision warfare was almost inevitable.

Stephen A. Douglas and the Kansas-Nebraska Act

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Stauffer:

Stephen Douglas was born in the Northeast, born in Vermont and moves to Illinois. Stephen Douglas, beginning in the late 1840s and certainly in the 1850s, was one of the leading congressmen in the United States. He, in one sense, after the death of Henry Clay, Stephen Douglas became one of the major spokespersons for the nation. And Stephen Douglas' main argument, and one of the reasons why he becomes so famous and prominent and powerful nationally, is his free soil argument, where he essentially says – or his popular sovereignty, or what Lincoln would call squatter sovereignty – where Stephen Douglas imagined democracy on a small scale. He said, in terms of how the territory should be legislated regarding slavery, "Let the settlers of the territories decide for themselves whether or not to vote slavery up or down. We don't need the Supreme Court. We don't need other places, all

the free states. And we don't need a Missouri Compromise line. Just whoever settles in these free territories, they can vote and decide whether or not they want to let slavery in that territory as a state or not."

And Lincoln vehemently opposed that position. And it plays out on the ground in which Kansas, after the Kansas Nebraska Act, is now open to slavery, and Missourians are bringing their slaves into Kansas. It's a territory, there's guerrilla warfare, horrible guerrilla warfare in Kansas, immediately after the Kansas Nebraska Act. In fact, congressmen in Congress say if the Kansas Nebraska Act passes, there's going to be warfare. There's going to be civil war in Kansas. Because anti-slavery Northerners are sending anti-slavery farmers to Kansas to make it free. Southerners are sending pro-slavery farmers to Kansas to make it slave. And there is brutal horrific civil warfare, and Stephen Douglas is okay with that.

And Stephen Douglas wants, believes that Kansas, and hopes that Kansas will enter the Union as a slave state. Tries to have it enter as a slave state because of this vote that was taken, that was basically a vote under warfare, where essentially there was a lot of anti-slavery settlers in Kansas were prohibited from voting, droves of pro-slavery Missourians were brought into Kansas territory just to vote. It was a complete scam in a sense, but it was horrific and essentially civil war. It begins with slavery. Slavery itself is a state of civil war. But at a national scale, before Fort Sumter, if you go to Kansas in the 1850s, you're recognizing they're in civil war.

The Lincoln-Douglas debates

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Stauffer:

Lincoln, in his arguments with Stephen Douglas, he borrows from Charles Sumner, the abolitionist Senator from Massachusetts, who brilliantly argues, as a young Senator in the early 1850s, that the Constitution does not legislate or does not provide or sanction property in human beings, because the word slave, slavery, or Negro is never used in the Constitution. The framers did that explicitly so as not to evoke or suggest that there could be property in human beings. And so the phrase for anti-slavery Northerners was, "No property in man," or, "No property in humans," and Lincoln latched on to that idea and believed that by limiting slavery to the states where it existed... And Lincoln also borrowed from Sumner by saying slavery could only be sanctioned in states. The federal government could not sanction slavery. Slavery was a creature of state law. It meant that the territories were under the jurisdiction of the federal government and the federal government had the power to prohibit slavery in them.

And so that's where Lincoln believed that by prohibiting the expansion of slavery into territories, and as more territories become states, they'll become free states, as more people immigrate to the United States, they'll move to the Northern states because they don't want to compete with slave labor, they'll eventually encircle the slave states and have the power ultimately, eventually, to end slavery. That's his very gradual vision for ending it. Lincoln made it very clear. One of the main distinctions Lincoln accused Douglas of is that Douglas tried to ignore the morality of slavery. Stephen Douglas said time and again, "It doesn't matter to me whether you vote slavery up or down," and Lincoln emphasized the morality of slavery, emphasized the profound evil of slavery while trying to sideline the question of race. And Stephen Douglas during his debates continually race-baited Lincoln, saying, "You're anti-slavery, you want to marry a Black woman, you're best friends with these Black folk." Stephen Douglas was catering to the profound racism, particularly in Illinois and in the middle states, in the United States in general.

That was one of Stephen Douglas' powerful accusations against him. He called Lincoln an abolitionist. Lincoln said, "I'm not an abolitionist. I don't believe that Blacks and whites should marry. I don't believe in integration necessarily." But he wanted to sidestep that and just focus on prohibiting the spread of slavery. That was something that Stephen Douglas won in the debates. Lincoln was very good at calling Stephen Douglas out. Stephen Douglas says, "Well, my popular sovereignty platform doesn't contradict or violate the Supreme Court, the Dred Scott decision." And Lincoln says, "Yes, it does. The Supreme Court says that it's unconstitutional to prohibit the spread of slavery anywhere. Your popular sovereignty would prohibit the spread if the settlers vote for the territory to become a free state. You too are violating the Constitution." And Stephen Douglas continued, tries to say, "No, I'm not." It's this very vigorous, one of the richest constitutional debates in American history that highlights that really the problem of the Constitution at that time: the ambiguity relating to slavery, the ambiguity relating to whether or not humans should be property, whether or not humans could be treated as chattel.

John Brown and Frederick Douglass

01:54:07:02

Stauffer:

John Brown actually first met Frederick Douglass in 1847. They became friends. Brown was a profoundly radical abolitionist. And in fact, his raid, Brown told Douglass this, his original vision that evolved into Harpers Ferry was what Brown called the Subterranean Passway. Brown wanted to recruit some hand-picked men, essentially soldiers, to place them in the Allegheny and the Adirondack Mountains and to make periodic raids into plantations and bring slaves into these mountains and move them up to Canada so that they can become free. And that would uproot the property value of plantations and Brown felt that over time

it could lead to a growing anti-slavery wave that would end slavery. Essentially, Brown and sons and sons-in-law go to Kansas, they're part of this horrible warfare in Kansas, and Brown eventually decides that the Subterranean Passway isn't going to happen anytime soon, and he wants to create this huge explosion that will lead to an end of slavery.

And so he forms this interracial army, 16 whites, five Blacks, and he plans to take over the largest federal arsenal in the United States, which is at Harpers Ferry. He meets with most of the North's Black leaders in Chatham, Canada to obtain their advice. They recommend it. In fact, Harriet Tubman is part of his army. In fact, he refers to her as General Tubman. But Martin Delany is another Black leader who's from Harpers Ferry, and says that there are a lot of free Blacks and slaves there. We will make sure that they are aware that you are coming. Initially, Brown planned to raid Harper's Ferry on July 4th of 1859, as a symbolic day to highlight the possibility of achieving the country. Brown, among his other problems, Brown was not a good tactician. He misses July 4th. He raids Harpers Ferry in October.

Douglass was involved in the raid. Douglass essentially wrote the provisional constitution that would govern those areas that Brown hoped to liberate from slavery. Brown essentially could not write a grammatically correct sentence and Douglass was, in my view, like Lincoln, one of the greatest writers. And so Douglass essentially edited, if not wrote, that provisional constitution for Brown. And before Brown raids Harpers Ferry, he calls Douglass to a meeting in Pennsylvania not far from Harpers Ferry and tries to convince Douglass to be Brown's right-hand man at Harpers Ferry. Douglass is the preeminent African-American leader. He's a household name. At this time, Frederick Douglass is far more famous nationally than Lincoln. Lincoln first becomes discussed in Eastern papers following his debates with Stephen Douglas, but he's not a national figure. Douglass is one of the two or three most prominent figures in the United States.

And Douglass refuses to go on the raid. He tries to dissuade Brown from raiding Harpers Ferry. It's not because Douglass at this point opposes violence, but in my view, Douglass

was always a prudent revolutionary. And he said, "Brown, you're entering a steel trap. You're going to die. I don't want you to die, you're a friend and, think of something else." And Douglass brings with him a fugitive named Shields Green and Brown is so convincing that Shields Green, this friend and fellow Black who's with Douglass, is so convinced by Brown's plan he says, "I'm going with the old man." You have this amazing moment, this interracial moment, where the Black leader feels that Harpers Ferry raid is a bad idea. Douglass goes back to Rochester and Shields Green, this other Black, says "I'm going here," which highlights the power of the interracial nature of this abolition movement.

And so Brown with his interracial army goes to Harpers Ferry, raids Harpers Ferry. He's captured, a number of raiders are killed, Brown is seriously injured. They are tried for treason and murder. They're found guilty and they're executed. Frederick Douglass is actually lucky to have escaped arrest. In fact, right after Harpers Ferry, there are letters discovered in Brown's knapsack between Douglass and Brown, and President Buchanan issues an arrest warrant for Douglass. When the news of Harpers Ferry hits, Douglass is giving one of his many famous speeches in Pennsylvania, and the telegraph operator who was an abolitionist received a telegraph from Washington D.C. to be delivered to the chief of police to arrest Douglass. And the telegraph operator, who's an abolitionist then first goes to Douglass, shows him the telegraph and says, "You got to get out of town right now." And so Douglass takes the train, he goes to Canada, and then he goes to England until the Harpers Ferry raid dissolves. There's a Senate investigation. Douglass comes close to being arrested as an accessory.

Lincoln's reaction to John Brown's raid

02:00:33:20

Stauffer:

Lincoln responds to the John Brown raid in a number of ways. In fact, the day that Brown is executed, which is December 2nd, Lincoln gives a speech by saying that we cannot help but sympathize with Brown's vigorous opposition to slavery. He was justly executed because he committed treason. He took up arms against the United States government. And then he uses that as a warning to Southern states, because at this point Southern states were advocating for secession, immediately after John Brown's raid. And Lincoln said, if you Southerners feel inclined to take up arms against the United States government, we will treat you the same way John Brown has been treated, because what is the punishment for the crime of treason? Execution. And I should say that Lincoln, I think, understood the cultural and political significance of John Brown's raid.

The significance of John Brown's raid

02:01:49:00

Stauffer:

One scholar, and I agree with it, the best way to understand it is that John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry was the 9/11 of the 19th century. And specifically what it did is that following his raid, a number of very influential Northerners, most notably Lydia Maria Child, who was one of the best writers in the North, an abolitionist, and then Thoreau and Emerson, all characterized John Brown as a great hero. Thoreau called Brown the greatest transcendentalist of all, and he said, essentially, "What is a transcendentalist? A man of principled action. A man who takes his principles seriously and is willing to act on them." And at the end of this address that then gets broadcast through Emerson, Thoreau says, "Some 1800 years ago, Christ was crucified. Tomorrow or soon, John Brown will be." Essentially, he refers to Brown as a Christ-like figure. And Emerson loved Thoreau's address

and reduced it into a soundbite that gets repeated in almost all of the papers, which was that, "John Brown will make the gallows glorious like the cross."

From the Southerners' perspective, they concluded that most Northerners saw Brown as a hero, as a champion, even if flawed. And John Brown's raid is the Southerners' worst nightmare. Why? Because the only thing more horrifying than the specter of a slave rebellion or slave revolution is, from a racist white Southerners' view, one that's interracial, that has whites as well as Blacks, because then it has a chance of succeeding. And in the wake of John Brown's raid, in the immediate wake, Southern states start using federal funds to stockpile arms. They're already starting to plan for the idea of secession. Following John Brown's raid, they refuse to countenance and to respect and to trust Stephen Douglas, who essentially had been the leader of the Democratic Party. The Southern slave code, which is essentially arguing that every aspect of the Dred Scott decision should be implemented, they insisted upon that. They tried to force Stephen Douglas to abandon his popular sovereignty platform. He wouldn't.

What happens is, the Democratic Party splits in two. The Democratic National Convention occurs at Charleston, South Carolina in April, during the period in which the Senate investigation on John Brown's raid is still ongoing. I've looked at the papers. The newspapers, John Brown was front page news every day from the raid through June of 1860. When the Democratic National Convention convenes, Brown is still the front page news, the center of discussion, and Southern Democrats essentially walk out concluding they can no longer trust Northern Democrats. Now it's essentially a four way race for the presidency. There's the Southern Democratic party with John Breckinridge, this vigorous, pro-slavery, expansionist candidate. There's the Northern Democratic candidate, which is Stephen Douglas. There is a Constitutional party, which essentially an attempt to recover the old Whig party. And Lincoln.

If you run the numbers, one argument, there's a debate among scholars, is that with a split in the Democratic Party, that essentially assures an election for Lincoln. Had the Democratic Party not split in two, would Stephen Douglas be elected? Possibly, probably. It depends on who you talk to. That's why that raid is so important in terms of the final vote in the 1860 election. And the other thing that is important to understand about Southerners is that Southerners made it very clear, because the Republican Party is the first national anti-slavery party, Southerners said, if a Republican is elected president, we are seceding. In 1856, John C. Frémont comes actually fairly close. It's a close race. He loses to Buchanan, but Southerners vowed to secede, especially in the Gulf States, if Frémont were elected. And the day after Lincoln is elected, the day after, South Carolina announces its secession convention and secedes in 30 days later, because he was the candidate for this party that they recognized was so threatening to their existence, in much the same way that had John C. Frémont been elected in 1856, they probably would have seceded then. In fact, in 1850, during the debates over the Fugitive Slave Law and the compromise measures, there was a secession convention in 1850 in which delegates from nine Southern states convened. They decided not to secede, but they imposed what they called these regulations that they wanted to be implemented. Secession was always the trump card of Southerners.

John Brown was the 9/11 of the 19th century, and what I mean by that is that Brown's raid, and what it exposes about the profound differences between the South and the North, are clarified for Americans. And they're clarified in a way in which Southerners, from their perspective, they're not wedded to the Union. They are wedded solely to slavery, and Northerners increasingly recognize that, even though they don't want to. For most Northerners, the idea of Union is more precious. A lot of Northerners, arguably most Northerners by the 1850s, they were anti-slavery, but they realized that slavery could destroy the Union, and given a choice between their faith in Union and their faith in anti-slavery, they chose the Union and were willing to ditch anti-slavery.

In fact, right after South Carolina and then the other Southern states secede following Lincoln's election, by the time Lincoln delivers his inaugural address, the Confederacy has already been formed, seven states have already seceded. There's not yet been war, but most Northerners are still vigorously, desperately clinging to this vision of union.

And at this time they're blaming the abolitionists. They're saying it's all your fault. It's your fault for John Brown's raid. John Brown's raid caused the disunion. Yeah, well maybe we like Lincoln, but this is disastrous. And there were mob attacks on Black and white abolitionists, and Lincoln during the "secession crisis" – what the period is known between his election and Fort Sumter – Lincoln recognizes that he needs to retain the support of anti-slavery Northerners and it's very important for him not to be inculpated with having started a war. He wants to prevent war. He wants to retain the position of the Republican Party platform as non-extension. A lot of Republicans at this time are telling Lincoln to just abandon the anti-slavery platform, abandon the non-extension platform. And Lincoln to his credit is unwilling to do so. He is unwilling to accept the expansion of slavery into the Northern territories, which a lot of Republicans are willing to do just to prevent disunion.

Lincoln's early presidential priorities

02:11:16:04

Stauffer:

Lincoln is deeply, deeply worried because the day after his election, South Carolina secedes, and at this point, remember, inauguration is in March, not January. Lincoln wants to do a few things. He does not want to give away the basic platforms of the Republican Party. A number of Republicans are saying, let's just abandon our central platform which is our anti-slavery platform, our non-extension platform. Lincoln privately, it's a period in which

president-elects do not give speeches, they remain private. But in his letters, he vows and convinces a number of other Republicans not to abandon that anti-slavery policy. In fact, he says in a number of letters, "If we give up our non-extension platform, we give everything up." This party was founded as essentially primarily as an anti-slavery party. That's one thing he does.

The second thing is, as he's watching secession, his main goal is to prevent other states from seceding and to lure the seceded states back to the Union by saying, "Yes, I'm a Republican. Yes, I have an anti-slavery platform, but you're irrational. You're irrational and I am not, and my party is not the threat that you perceive it is." And so that's his aim. He wants to prevent more states from seceding, especially the upper South, and he wants to try to lure the states back into the Union and that frames his inaugural address.

For Lincoln, the idea of a union was really a religious view, but it wasn't just Lincoln. It was for most Northerners. In my view, and a number of other people share this view, that the reason that more Northerners were not vigorously anti-slavery is because they felt they had to make a decision between union and anti-slavery and that's why Lincoln was not more vigorous as a anti-slavery advocate. In fact, Lincoln in his inaugural address captures his view and, in my view, most Northern views about union where he refers, the wonderful last line, "The mystic chords of union." Mystic, mystical. That evokes a religious, a spiritual sensibility. There is an immanence, almost a divine notion, to the idea of union.

And Lincoln is aware of that, not just for himself, but for a lot of Northerners, and I think that was crucially important. When Lincoln delivers his inaugural address, his main theme is on this mystical idea of union, in which he refers to secession as the essence of anarchy. We know that he spent a lot of time writing that first inaugural, and one of the things he looked at is President Jackson, Andrew Jackson's writings on preventing South Carolina from seceding economically from the tariff. And Jackson, who was a slave owner, essentially threatens to kill or threatens to hang South Carolina congressmen if they repudiate the

tariff. It's a kind of economic form of secession, and he forces South Carolinians to capitulate. And Lincoln reads that, and one central theme of his inaugural address is, and he says it more than once, secession is the essence of anarchy. By seceding, you have created treason against the United States government. He doesn't say it, but essentially that implies you too are becoming the John Brown.

Lincoln's first inaugural address

02:15:54:11

Stauffer:

Was Lincoln naive in thinking that the die wasn't already cast, that he could prevent war and lure the seceded states back ... I don't think, from his perspective ... From our perspective today, yeah. I think that could be seen as naive. But the United States ... Each state was so diverse. It was only the Gulf States that had seceded. Yes, they control the vast, the majority of the money. It was where slavery was the most profitable, but there are all these ... all of the upper South that had not yet seceded, and for a Confederacy to have any long-term legitimacy, they really needed more than a few states.

And Lincoln believed that there are large numbers of the upper South in Kentucky and Tennessee who identified as much with the Union, certainly if not the North, as they did with the South. And so he felt that there was an opportunity to lure the seceded states back in the Union and one way in which he, is reflected as both the Republican Party and what Lincoln says in his inaugural address. Congress was already passing legislation to try to lure the seceded states back into the Union. Congress passes a constitutional amendment, the first 13th amendment.

The amendment that we know is the amendment that abolishes slavery. Congress passes a 13th amendment, I think a day or two before Lincoln gives his inaugural address. And it's an amendment that protects and guarantees slavery in the slave states forever. And Lincoln initially opposes that amendment, but is persuaded by other, more seasoned Republicans to support it. And so in his inaugural address, Lincoln refers to this new constitutional amendment and says, I haven't read it. I understand it's been passed by Congress. I support it. I have no opposition to it.

And for abolitionists in the North, that's just ... They hate him for saying that. And Lincoln also ... He's very ambiguous, but he refers to fugitive slaves. And it's so ambiguous that there's been a debate among scholars, but one interpretation is that Lincoln refers to fugitive slaves, saying that we will not violate the fugitive slave law. But Lincoln also points out, as a kind of warning to the South, that the states who have seceded and formed this new nation ... Fugitive slave law doesn't apply to them.

But he's very, very cagey in how he words his inaugural address. So the upshot is, on the one hand it's very progressive in saying that the essence of anarchy is secession. It's illegitimate to secede. It's not just illegitimate, it's a crime, it's treason. On the other hand, he is offering, he's with Congress, he is encouraging the Southern States to return and supporting this new constitutional amendment that guarantees slavery in the slave states forever.

And actually, the amendment, the language of it is ... It's an unamendable amendment. It essentially says this amendment cannot be amended, cannot be changed. And it doesn't make any difference. The other ... So, that's his inaugural address. But right after he gives it, he realizes what a bind he's in, because he goes to the White House and one of the pieces, among the piles of letters, is a letter from Major Anderson, who is in control of a federal fort, Fort Sumter, which is outside of Charleston.

And Lincoln refers to the federal forts in the states who've already formed this new Confederacy and says essentially to Southerners, "These are federal property and we want these ... We don't want you taking the federal property." Robert Anderson at Fort Sumter essentially sends this letter to Lincoln saying, "My men, we're going to run out of food in a week. And so, what, we need help."

The death of Willie Lincoln

02:20:45:13

Stauffer:

The death of Willie devastated Lincoln and Mary Todd. And, in one sense, one could say that Willie's death symbolized the meaning of the war, the willingness to sacrifice one's life for not just the cause of union, but for the cause of what the United States symbolized or represented in Lincoln's mind, which is freedom and the possibility of equality. And it also coincided with a period in which the war was not going well.

One of the many changes, I think, that you see in Lincoln following Willie's death is that, before, as president, he rarely invoked God or religion or the supernatural divine. After Willie's death, he increasingly refers to God or the divinity or religion, increasingly meets with religious figures. That's an important change. And it also reflects, as a result of suffering ... In a sense, one could say that Lincoln recognized that the idea of heaven or the afterlife was an important part of the decisions he should make as the president.

He's grappling with meaning. And he knows, he's long believed that God believes that slavery is wrong. There's a number of instances that ... In my view, Lincoln is unusual in his religious views at this time, in that during the war, and even in the 1850s, most Americans

were prophetic, meaning, they believed that they knew God's will and they knew what God wanted. And by 1860 a huge number of Americans believed that God would bring about a millennium or an apocalypse that would lead to this new age, both in the South and the North.

A number of scholars have characterized Lincoln as a Calvinist. And what that means in religious terms is that, a central theme of Calvinism is that you cannot know God's will. The closest that you can come is to look for signs of God's will, but to presume to know God's will is a kind of hubris or arrogance. And in my view, one of the great examples of Lincoln's understanding is when he meets with his cabinet, according to the Secretary of Navy, who writes about it in his diary.

Lincoln – this is in August of 1862, and Lincoln has already drafted a version of the Emancipation Proclamation – he's waiting for what he hopes will be a military victory so that the North will endorse this proclamation. And it's also a proclamation that is – remember, Congress has encouraged him to write from the second Confiscation Act – and it also helps prevent, does prevent England from recognizing the Confederacy.

In the cabinet meeting, he says that he knows there's going to be a battle between McClellan and Lee. It becomes the Battle of Antietam. And, according to Gideon Wells, Lincoln says that if we obtain a military victory at this battle, which is Antietam, I will treat that as a sign that God wants me to issue this proclamation. And McClellan declares a tenuous victory and Lincoln immediately issues that preliminary Emancipation Proclamation.

But the very language he uses suggests that he doesn't presume to know God's will. He's looking for signs. And another place you see it is in his second inaugural address. But the upshot is that one of the many effects of Willie's death is that Lincoln's religious sensibilities become heightened. And he recognizes that his faith is an important aspect of the decisions that he makes during the war.

Fear of British recognition of the Confederacy

02:26:10:16

Stauffer:

Lincoln was also very fearful of, especially, England recognizing the Confederacy. And had England formally recognized the Confederacy, in my view, that would effectively help bring about a Confederate victory, because it would have allowed Confederates to receive huge amounts of boats and arms and aid from England.

And on the one hand, 98% of Brits were abolitionists. England was the most abolitionist country at the time and had pressured other countries to abolish slavery. On the other hand, England desperately needed Southern cotton for their cotton mills. It was one of the largest businesses in England. So economically they were suffering. The British were suffering. And the first and second Confiscation Acts that Congress passes are essentially anti-slavery acts, but, both then and now, acts that Congress passes don't get broadcast to the world. Presidential proclamations get broadcast to the world.

And so, Lincoln ... The second Confiscation Act that Congress passes is an act that declares all slaves who've reached Union lines "forever free," and it calls on the President to issue a proclamation of freedom, one, so that it gets broadcast, so that England won't recognize the Confederacy and two, so that both the executive branch and the legislative branch are in alignment, because there's a constitutional question over property. And if at least two of these, two of the three wings of the government are in alignment, there's less likelihood of challenging the emancipation measure.

Black participation in the Civil War

02:28:28:13

Stauffer:

Lincoln ... A number of generals and ... It's unclear based on Lincoln's statement at this point, but early on generals realized that Blacks are the crucial, vital source to the United States Army and military. And in fact, Lincoln accepts it, but the United States Navy is integrated from the beginning. And the Navy's integrated from the beginning because, one, African-Americans, there's a long tradition of knowing how to navigate boats and being very sophisticated as sailors and knowing the waterways. Two, the Navy is outside of the spotlight, so the focus isn't on the Navy. And, three, it's symbolically much more palatable to integrate the Navy and to recruit Blacks as naval, as military, whereas in the Army, if you give a Black man a gun and tell him to shoot whites, that incites and outrages the racism of most Northerners.

But the Navy's integrated from the beginning. And then the first Confiscation Act authorizes any slave who's reached Union lines to be captured, to be treated as "contraband." And it doesn't use the term freedom, but essentially, all slaves to reach Union lines, the army puts them to work as laborers and protects them, won't return them to masters.

But mostly because over 90% of African-Americans are in the South, and they know the landscape. They know, they have a much better sense, they serve in a sense as the intelligence for the United States military. And they can become a crucial source of help in terms of whether ... Grant uses them for growing food. In a sense they're like special forces, because they know the South, they know the landscape, they are ... And Lincoln will eventually realize that they're crucial to a Union victory. And Lincoln knows, and everyone in the North knows, that the Confederacy, or the rebels, are using slaves to make arms, to

build boats. They're putting, they're making, having slaves do the dirty work for the Confederacy. And for the Union to do nothing with them would lead to a rebel victory.

Frederick Douglass' strategy to win the Civil War

02:31:23:03

Stauffer:

Lincoln is very much led. Lincoln was very much led by especially African-Americans, but also by Congress. Congress was ahead of him in the first Confiscation Act – he signs the first Confiscation Act and the second Confiscation Act – but especially African-Americans, because African-Americans, from the very beginning, and most notably Frederick Douglass, who was ...

Douglass becomes even more famous during the war. As soon as Fort Sumter occurs, Douglass broadcasts his vision that the easiest way to end the war is to free slaves and arm them. It's a crucial source of power. He first ... He refers to it as a crucial source of Black power. The easiest way to end this war is to free all the slaves, arm them and we will vanquish the rebellion. And because they constitute a crucial source of power. And until you do that, the Confederacy is using them to their benefit. And they know the landscape. They hate the masters. There's already a warfare within the South ... Douglass, as a former slave, knows, slavery itself is a state of war. We've got these allies who want to be fighting, wanting more resources to vanquish their enemies. Give them the resources, put them on our side. It's a no brainer, essentially. And then Lincoln eventually comes around to that.

Lincoln's hesitation over Black enlistment

02:33:08:08

Stauffer:

He hesitates for a number of reasons. One, constitutional. Lincoln is nothing if not a very talented lawyer and legal scholar and legal politician. He worries about the constitutionality of using property, basically having the government take away property of someone else. That's one important reason. The other very important reason is that – in fact, Douglass criticizes Lincoln for it – Lincoln worries about the border states. So there are a number of border slave states, and most notably, Maryland, which surrounds Washington D.C. And a lot of Marylands are pro-Southern. And if Lincoln issues an Emancipation Proclamation right away, and publicly frees Blacks and arms them, there's a good chance that Maryland is going to join the rebellion. And if that happens, Washington D.C. is surrounded. The chances of winning the war are very slim.

And if Kentucky goes to the rebellion, the chances of winning the war are slim. Indiana actually, Maryland comes close to joining the Confederacy. Lincoln fortunately arrests the secession delegates. Indiana. He does the same with Indiana. Indiana plans a secession convention and Lincoln, the Lincoln administration, arrests them for treason and prevents secession. But he realizes that if he is forthright at freeing Blacks and arming them, that if he loses the border states, the chances of actually winning the war are very slim. And in fact, by late 1862, the greatest threat – and Lincoln comes to realize this, and most Northerners do – the greatest threat to Union victory is the Copperheads of the North.

The Copperheads are essentially Northerners who sympathize with the Confederacy, who hate the idea of emancipation. And there are two types of Copperheads, those who want the Union as it was, with slavery intact, and the other copperheads are those that just let the South remain a separate slave owning nation. They are a major, major threat. And

ultimately ... In my view, had Sherman not taken Atlanta, George McClellan, who's essentially a Copperhead candidate from the Democratic Party, probably would have won the election. Lincoln and most other Republicans thought so too. And it essentially would have meant a Confederate victory.

Lincoln's evolution on Black enlistment

02:35:56:10

Stauffer:

What got him there was, one, the war effort not going well. Two, and this is I think suggestive and significant, is that increasingly generals in the field who had not previously been abolitionists, just from a military perspective, saying, "Hey, if you free the slaves and let me use them, it's going to make my job a lot easier" And increasing ... in general after general, not all of them, but a large number of generals, simply from a strategic perspective, are saying, from a military perspective it's going to be a lot easier to vanquish the rebellion and preserve the Union if we end slavery.

And that was an important message to Lincoln. Another important message was abolitionists in the North who were saying the same thing. Douglass' central argument from the beginning of the war. And Douglass actually helped to convince white abolitionists and abolitionists were united in this is that the easiest way to win the war is to free Blacks and arm them. And that will vanquish slavery.

Essentially, what the abolitionists were saying from the beginning is that the divide that Lincoln was trying to make, and a lot of conservative Republicans were trying to make, was the divide between preserving the Union and abolishing slavery. And the abolitionists, especially Douglass and the Black abolitionists were saying from the beginning, that's not a

division. In order to win the war, you have to abolish slavery. In order to abolish slavery, you have to win the war. You can't see them as separate aims. They are one and the same. They are one and the same, do not treat them as separate issues.

Lincoln's reaction to the bravery of Black troops

02:38:05:17

Stauffer:

Once he armed Blacks, the significance he made, in fact, in 1864 in one letter, and he said it in a number of cases, he says the 160 at that time or so Blacks that we have serving us in the Army and the Navy are a crucial source of power. Keep them and we will win the war. Lose them, and we'll lose the war. He recognized that certainly by 1864.

Lincoln also knew that, from the beginning, African-Americans – before the Emancipation Proclamation – African-Americans joined, served as independent, unpaid soldiers with a number of regiments. And in fact, some of the first casualties, in which troops were protecting Baltimore, were casualties of African-Americans, who were unpaid, independent soldiers, realizing that even though I might risk my life or die, the opportunity to shoot and kill slave-owning Southerners or those who represent it, would be worth it.

Lincoln and Frederick Douglass' friendship

02:39:30:00

Stauffer:

In my view, the relationship is very important. Douglass first meets with Lincoln in August of 1863. He had been very critical of him through much of the early war and as ... had a number of abolitionists, because Douglass, from the beginning of the war, he's one of the first figures to emphasize preserving the Union and vanquishing slavery are one and the same. Do not try to separate them. And Douglass is, before the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation is passed, Douglass is more and more and more outraged that the Lincoln administration is doing nothing to publicize the abolition of slavery.

And Douglass does recognize the final Emancipation Proclamation as a major change, a major shift. In fact, he says that with this Emancipation Proclamation there's no way that slavery can endure. This is over. And Douglass celebrates, he's thrilled, he recognizes also, and this is important, in the final Emancipation Proclamation, the calls for the arming of Blacks. Essentially that means that Blacks have citizenship, because there were two... Before the 14th Amendment, which clarifies who is a citizen, before the 14th Amendment which clarifies citizenship in the United States, the two symbols of citizenship that virtually everyone agreed on is that one, if you served in the United States military, you were a citizen, two, if you received a US passport, you were a citizen.

So for the final emancipation proclamation to call for the arming of soldiers as soldiers, that also connotes citizenship and that's huge. In the Navy, they had already been essentially citizens, but their numbers are tiny and it's out of the public eye. Douglass, his first meeting with Lincoln, it's Douglass is again frustrated with Lincoln for a number of things. One of the responses to Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation is that Jefferson Davis issues his own proclamation which states that any African-American soldier captured will be treated as a

slave insurrectionary and murdered or re-enslaved, which is a gross violation of the international laws of war.

And Douglass is outraged that Lincoln is not issuing a counter proclamation. And so he wants to meet with Lincoln and essentially tell him to issue a counter proclamation. And the second reason is that Black soldiers are being paid half of what white soldiers are, and he is outraged at that. And Douglass, after the Emancipation Proclamation, Douglass is a lead recruiter for the 54th Massachusetts Black Regiment, the first Northern Black regiment. His two sons are among the first two recruits on the muster roll.

So Douglass goes to D.C. on August 10th, ends up... He doesn't have an appointment. He arrives early in the morning. I'll simplify the story. There's already a long line of whites waiting to see Lincoln. Douglass sends up his card and within three minutes Lincoln calls him up to the White House. And so Douglass passes all these whites who are waiting in line to get to the White House, and he hears one man mumble a racist statement. And when Lincoln meets Douglass, he immediately goes on the defensive.

He says, "Hello, Mr. Douglass. I know you. It's good to meet you. I know you've been very critical of me. Let me defend myself. Let me explain my position." And so that's how we know that Lincoln has read Douglass's newspaper. He's read his speeches. And Douglass is, he truly is one of the most prominent Northern speakers. He's traveling everywhere. And so they have this hour meeting, and Douglass didn't know this, but Lincoln had just passed a retaliatory order stating that for every Black soldier who's enslaved or executed, the union will execute a confederate or a rebel soldier. And that stops, it helps to check the inhumanity.

Even after their first meeting, they publicly declared themselves as friends. The next person that Lincoln met with that day, after his meeting with Douglass, was a white politician. And he said, he boasted in a sense, he said, "I just had a meeting with Frederick Douglass, and I consider him one of if not the most meritorious men in these United States." You can't ask

for higher praise than that. And Douglass, it was either later that day or the next day, he said, "I had a meeting with President Lincoln, and I consider him one of the great self-made men," essentially. And they publicly define themselves as friendship, and at that time the term had far more political, even religious, cultural power and symbolism than it has today. Especially it connoted equality. It connoted that two people genuinely enjoyed each other, they respected each other, they liked each other and in some definitions, it's referred to as almost a kind of a soulmate. But a central theme of friendship is that the two friends were equals. And in effect, friendship had long been seen as a kind of symbol or metaphor for the idea of the United States. And for them, right after this meeting, they genuinely got along. I mean they're very different, but they genuinely liked each other.

And Lincoln ended up inviting Douglass on numerous occasions to the Soldier's Home to have tea or dinner, and Douglass couldn't go because he had a strict rule with himself that he would never back out of a speaking engagement, even if it was to meet the President or some better offer. It was part of his kind of moral, part of his moral universe.

But they ended up having two additional meetings. And in the last meeting, and we know this from people at the time who wrote diaries, is that Lincoln or Douglass attends the inaugural address, I have – there's one of the many photographs of Douglass, in fact Douglass is the most photographed American in the 19th century – you see Douglass, he has a front row seat. You see Lincoln. And after the address, Douglass attends the reception at the White House. And when Lincoln sees him enter, he's surrounded by a crowd of whites and he sees Douglass and he raises his long arm and he says loudly, "Here comes my friend, Mr. Douglass. I saw you in the crowd today. What did you think of my address? There is no man in these United States whose opinion I value more than yours." And Douglass responded – another beautiful line – and says, "Mr. Lincoln, that was a sacred effort." And it was, and the term "sacred effort" is, I think, just perfectly apt.

And that too captures, despite their differences, they had dramatic profound differences – Lincoln was never really, I mean, he was forced into being a radical revolutionary, he was not by nature a radical. Douglass was a slave, he couldn't help but be a radical and a revolutionary from the beginning. But both of them truly believed in the idea of democracy, and in the ideal of democracy that extended at some point to Blacks as well as whites. And Douglass then went much farther in terms of how quickly that should happen. And Douglass was also a major women's rights advocate. He believed that women should have equal rights. And Lincoln, I mean, that would have destroyed Lincoln's career too had he championed equal rights for women.

Frederick Douglass' publications

02:48:46:05

Stauffer:

Frederick Douglass was, he edited and published the longest running African-American newspaper in the 19th century. Beginning with the *North Star*, *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, and then *Douglass' Monthly* from 1847 until 1863. It was very important. Douglass was unusual when he started the *North Star* because most papers were organs of a society or political party or organization. And Douglass had the courage to publish and edit an independent paper. And why papers were so important and such an important source of circulation and news is that at that time other newspapers could borrow, freely borrow, articles from other newspapers.

And so it's one of the reasons why we know Lincoln had read Douglass, and other white congressmen read Douglass. Maybe they hadn't read his newspaper, but a number of his articles circulate in the *New York Tribune* or papers that they do read. And that was very

common. And so it was in one sense, and it was a culture, especially in the North, in which Americans were voracious newspaper readers. And so you could find Douglass' columns, Douglass' writing, his speeches. Douglass was, if not the greatest and most widely recognized and celebrated orator, he was one of the four or five greatest, and almost all of his speeches were then circulated in newspapers.

And in fact, he was also as I've said and written about with colleagues, the most photographed American. When he would give a speech, he would sell pamphlets of other speeches, which were cheap, he would sell photographs of himself and he would give the speech and then the speech would then be published and he could sell, he would distribute that later. So his ideas, it was a period in which one's ideas could be broadcast widely. And in many respects, there was a greater public voice in democracy than there is today where you have to be in, unless you're on Twitter – which is to prevent any kind of nuance, and Douglass was nothing if not nuanced.

Significant Lincoln artifacts

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Stauffer:

I love the pen that Lincoln used to sign the Emancipation Proclamation that became a symbolic instrument. So, and the reason I mentioned that is that one of the influences that led Lincoln to revise the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation into the final Emancipation Proclamation, is a result of a coalition between a Black abolitionist, a white abolitionist and another white abolitionist, Charles Sumner. Charles Sumner sent to Lincoln writings from William Cooper Nell, this Boston Black abolitionist who had already written

extensively on the large number of instances of Blacks serving in the U.S. military, from the revolution forward.

And a white merchant in Boston, George Livermore, who wrote, borrows from William Cooper Nell and writes about a history of Blacks serving in the United States Army, the Navy, as precedent for Lincoln constitutionally being able to authorize the arming of Blacks as soldiers, and which reflects this notion of citizenship. And Lincoln reads Livermore's book, which is hugely influenced by William Cooper Nell, and a crucial change in the final Emancipation Proclamation from the preliminary is that in the preliminary proclamation Lincoln embraces and invokes colonization, which is a racist solution, encouraging colonizing Blacks outside the United States. It's a form of ethnic cleansing.

In the final Emancipation Proclamation there is no mention of colonization. Then, in the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, there's no call for arming Blacks as soldiers. In the final proclamation there is, which is a clear symbol of citizenship in virtually everyone's mind. So Livermore asks Charles Sumner to ask Lincoln for the pen that he used to write the final Emancipation Proclamation as a token of the influence of Livermore and William Cooper Nell, this Black and white kind of team of abolitionists who helped him revise radically the first, the preliminary and final proclamation.

And Lincoln sends it to Livermore, who has a celebration with William Cooper Nell there, and ends up giving it to the Mass Historical Society and that's why it's there. So that's one, I think, symbol. Another is Lincoln's hat, one of his many top hats. It would be a symbol. He was famous for carrying letters in them. People knew of Lincoln because he was so tall anyway.

Probably I should say the most, for me, richest symbol that captures Douglass's relationship with Lincoln is that after Lincoln was assassinated, Mary Todd gave one of Lincoln's, perhaps his favorite cane to Frederick Douglass, as a token of his respect and friendship for Douglass. And she also gave canes to other Black leaders as a token of respect, and also

showing the influence African-American – that Black leaders have on Lincoln. In fact, Lincoln also to his credit invited more Black leaders to the White House than all previous presidents combined. And that was significant. So he's the first president who actually listens to what Blacks have to say and acts on their advice.

The achievements of the abolitionist movement

02:56:10:12

Stauffer:

So abolitionists, the definition of an abolitionist from 1830s through the Civil War was someone who believed in an immediate end to slavery, and racial equality. The racial equality part was crucial. And it's profoundly different from anti-slavery advocates, who hated slavery but believed in very gradual abolition. Essentially the best way to understand the difference between anti-slavery and abolitionists, abolitionists were revolutionaries. Racism was a scourge in the United States. Racism marinated the entire country, not just the South.

And so to advocate for an immediate end to slavery and racial equality, equality under the law for everyone. The abolition movement is also the first women's rights movement. That was a truly radical gesture, and not every white abolitionist lived up to that ideal. And Black abolitionists would call them on it. But the fact that it was an integrated, interracial radical coalition is significant because it signified what was possible in the United States. And ultimately it led to the Reconstruction amendments that officially constitutionally abolished slavery.

The 14th Amendment is the first time equality is brought into the Constitution: equal protection under the law. The 14th Amendment was the first amendment that clarifies

citizenship. If you're born in the United States, you are a citizen. That's a major shift. And the 15th Amendment, in fact, Douglass and a number of other radicals wanted women to be included in the 15th Amendment. And it didn't get included. The radical- the abolitionists and women's rights advocates, many of them thought that they would be able to get another amendment that provided unrestricted suffrage for women just in a few years, but by that point, the kind of revolutionary possibility that the war brought was over. And as we know, it's not until 1919 that suffrage for women became universal.