DAVID REYNOLDS

LINCOLN'S DILEMMA

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David Reynolds

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Interviewed by Jackie Olive & Barak Goodman

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Lincoln's early aversion to slavery

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DAVID REYNOLDS:

When Lincoln was growing up, his parents broke off with a small group of Baptists. There were so many different kinds of Baptists at that time, and the 15-person- group that formed the Little Mount Baptist Church in his area of Kentucky happened to be emancipationist, with two ministers who were actually abolitionists, which was kind of a quite rare thing in the South, because slavery in general was endorsed by Christianity in the South. So this was almost a chance mutation, so to speak. And a fortunate one, because Lincoln later said, when he

looked back on his childhood, he said, "I don't recall a time when I did not hate slavery. I do not recall a time." So I think that even from the very, very beginning, in Kentucky, when he was a young boy, he was hearing anti-slavery sermons and so forth. And also, it is true that in his region of Kentucky where he lived, about half of the people that lived there were enslaved Black people. So we don't know how many of them he actually encountered. He must have encountered some, and perhaps developed a certain animus against slavery on that basis as well, because when his parents left Kentucky to move to Indiana, he recalled later that they left because of two reasons: real estate, there was a problem with real estate in Kentucky, and slavery, those two things. So his parents, even though we don't know too much about their slavery feelings, we know that they were anti-slavery and that he was seeped in anti-slavery from a young age. Another possible source of his anti-slavery feelings is that he twice took a raft, when he was a little bit older, as a teenager, down to New Orleans. He certainly witnessed slavery in New Orleans. Now again, there's one report of somebody who said that that is the very moment when he turned against slavery, because he saw people in chains and people being sold, sold at auction and so forth. I can't go that far, because the person who said that actually didn't make it all the way to New Orleans with him. It's possible that Lincoln told him that, but I think that he at least was exposed to the institution of slavery in New Orleans. And then when he moved to Illinois, he continued to be anti-slavery, but at the time, Illinois was so conservative and he settled in New Salem, where there were some abolitionists but also there were a lot of Southerners as well. So he had to be a little bit cautious. Now, when he went to the state legislature and his fellow legislators in Illinois came out very strongly against abolitionism, he and a fellow legislator, Dan Stone, issued a proclamation saying, "Although we disagree with some of the methods of abolitionists," who

were frankly quite radical in their statements and also some of them were suggesting that the American Union should be actually broken up with the South going its own way, so he said, "While we disagree with some of what they're saying, we consider slavery a profound injustice and we think that slavery should be abolished at least to begin with in Washington, D.C."

Lincoln's understanding of enslaved peoples' experience

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DAVID REYNOLDS :

He gives no evidence of what I call entering the subjectivity of the enslaved person. By that, I mean knowing what it really feels like from the inside. There's no evidence on record of that, until in 1841, when he's 32 and he's visiting his friend Joshua Speed in Kentucky, and Joshua Speed has some enslaved people on his plantation. But going home, he sees on a boat a number of enslaved people that were in chains. He said, "They were like fish on a trotline." They were chained together, and at the time of that moment, I'm not saying he covered it up, but when he wrote to Mary Speed, the sister of Joshua Speed, he said, "It was interesting because there, they were going to be sold into the Deep South and yet they were laughing and they were cracking jokes. They were almost the happiest people on board, and it shows you how God can make even the worst conditions tolerable." However, 14 years later when he wrote Joshua Speed again, he said, "You know, ever since that incident, I have been haunted by that group of enslaved people in chains. I've been haunted by it. Really, it has helped to make my life miserable thinking about them." So I think there was on some deep level an emotional response at that moment in 1841.

Slavery as a political crisis in the 1830s and 40s

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DAVID REYNOLDS:

There are two main reasons why slavery is becoming an issue in the 1830s and 1840s. The first is with the rise of abolitionism, radical abolitionism under William Lloyd Garrison, who publishes his first issue of *The Liberator* in 1831, and Garrison says, "I WILL BE HEARD!" in capital letters with explanation points. "I WILL BE HEARD!" And he continues. There's a gathering moral opposition to slavery as an institution in the South, and correspondingly, there is a growing defense of it as an institution in the South. For example, John Calhoun in 1837 says, "Slavery is a positive good. It's a very, very good thing. It's good for African Americans. It's good for white people. It's a good thing." So you had these different ideologies, one North and one South, and then the whole situation really became a burning issue in the 1840s. Why? Because of the Mexican War, whereby America took over and annexed so much Western territory, that eventually became California, New Mexico, Arizona, and a lot of the states in between. And then the huge question was at that point, what's going to happen to that territory? There had previously been the Missouri Compromise, which tried to draw a line at a certain parallel below which slavery was allowed and north of which it was not allowed, but the whole question is would the southern part of all that territory be taken over by slave states? Maybe it doesn't sound like a big issue, but the reason it was a big issue is because if you have one slave state, two, three, four, five, one after the other like that, suddenly the representation in the Senate and increasingly in the House of Representatives then becomes really

taken over by the slave power, you see. So there's a huge movement now to try to stop the Western spread of slavery, and there's a big tension that's growing between the North and the South over that. The South was quite frank about not only wanting to take over the Southwestern territories and make them for slavery, but also even spreading into Mexico, to taking over Mexico and parts of Latin America, and for sure Cuba. Suddenly you have this vision of all these slave states growing and growing and growing, and there was just a tremendous growing tension then between the North and the South about this expansion. Lincoln, that's what really fires him up, when Stephen Douglas in 1854 authors the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which says, "Let's leave the Western territories up to themselves to determine whether or not they want to have slavery. Let them vote by themselves." And Lincoln and all the other Republicans said, "No. We have to contain slavery where it is. The Constitution does not allow us to interfere with slavery in the states in which it already exists. However, for the federal territories, the presumption is that freedom is national. Slavery is local. Okay, we can let it exist where it already exists, but we can't allow it to go national." So that's where the big division comes between the Lincoln Republicans and then the Southern, and also the Northern Democrats, people like Stephen Douglas.

The Southern economy

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DAVID REYNOLDS:

Slavery by the middle of the 19th century, by 1850, had become immensely important to the Southern economy. The South had become the largest exporter of

cotton in the world. It provided so much cotton to England in particular. It was a very large supplier of tobacco, tobacco as well. And it was considered that enslaved people could do that kind, were more suited for that kind of work than white people were. So it was really on the shoulders of enslaved people to grow this cotton and to clean it in the cotton gin, to sort it out, and to bag it and so forth. The phrase cotton is king, cotton is king, was a boast among Southerners, and it was largely driven by capitalism at that point. Enslaved people themselves were an important piece of property and valuable piece of property for those who thought themselves to be their owners. The enslaved people were considered property, like perhaps a fine horse or a fine head of cattle or something like that. They were considered really beasts of burden and were valued as such. One reason why Harriet Beecher Stowe, she wrote an anti-slavery novel called *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and the original title was *The Man Who Was a Thing*, a very ironic title, to show that really enslaved people were treated as things. And when Frederick Douglass, who was an abolitionist orator who had escaped from slavery, one of the things that he would say when he went on the lecture platform was, "Here is the thing." And he would open his breast and he had a very Herculean kind of... He was being very ironic of course, but enslaved people were treated as property, as things, yeah.

Abolitionism and anti-slavery

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DAVID REYNOLDS:

Abolitionism by the 1840s had become fragmented. On the radical fringe, you had the Garrisonian abolitionists, including William Lloyd Garrison and Wendell Phillips and a few others in the American anti-slavery society, and they called for what they called disunion, the separation of the North and the South. They were so disgusted by slavery that if the South didn't agree just to abolish it, it should really go its own way and become its own thing. So they advocated disunion. However, there were a good number of people in the North who didn't believe in that, and they wanted to work within the political system to try to slowly get rid of slavery. So there was the Liberty Party, which comes up in the early 1840s, and tries to use political means to vote anti-slavery people into power. But it doesn't get much of a vote, and the same thing with the Free Soil Party in 1848. It doesn't get much of a popular vote, so politically, it just wasn't going very, very far. And then you had Evangelical anti-slavery people in New York under the Tappan brothers, Arthur and Lewis Tappan, and they wanted to use religious persuasion as a way of converting Southern slaveholders to be morally opposed to slavery. So you had these different movements. In general, in the 1840s, anti-slavery sentiment was increasing. But having said that, the radical abolitionists represented maybe 5% of popular opinion. They were on the fringe. The Liberty Party, which was political abolitionists, might represent another 10%. The Evangelical, maybe another 20%. The majority of Northerners frankly had learned to live with slavery, but having said that, there was a period beginning in 1845, between 1845 and 1855, which is what I call the American anti-slavery renaissance, where so many works began to appear, so many exposes of the horrors of slavery beginning with the wonderful slave narrative, the autobiography of Frederick Douglass, which is such a powerful, powerful work. And that comes out in 1845. It only sells about, oh, 12 or 11,000 copies, but still,

it gets around. You had more and more orators like Frederick Douglass, and then you had a gathering steam of these slave narratives and anti-slavery novels culminating in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, it comes out in 1852, and that became a massive bestseller, massive, both here and abroad. It sells a million copies abroad in a year. It sells about 310,000 copies in America. It's banned through much of the South, and one gentleman, he was an African American who had *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in his home, was condemned to jail for 10 years just for having the book. It was a very anti-slavery book, but in the North, it really galvanizes a lot of people and it feeds into this whole anti-slavery renaissance with the slave narratives and the novels. So by 1855, I would say the popular sentiment in the North was really largely anti-slavery, largely.

The Elijah Lovejoy incident

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DAVID REYNOLDS:

Elijah Lovejoy was an abolitionist editor who very bravely ran an anti-slavery newspaper in Alton, Illinois, which is on the river. But his newspaper press was mobbed. The press was actually stolen and thrown into the river a few times. And finally, Lovejoy became so incensed that he went out and he faced the mob with a rifle, a pro-slavery mob, and he was murdered. He was shot. He was killed. He became a kind of martyr in the North, including to Abraham Lincoln, who said it was really one of the signal events in abolitionism in America because of the real horror of that moment. It was just sheer murder of an anti-slavery editor.

In a speech that he gave the next year, in 1838, before the Young Men's Springfield Lyceum, he mentioned the Lovejoy incident as well as a number of other anti-abolitionist incidents, a couple of other editors whose presses were thrown into the river. And then a couple of very shocking incidents, which Lovejoy had actually protested against in which a St. Louis African American named Frank McIntosh was chained to a tree and burned, he was burned. He was an African American. Just a horrible thing. And then in the South, some white abolitionists went down there and tried to spark a slave rebellion, but they got captured and they got hanged from trees, not just they though, many, many enslaved people were hanged as well. Lincoln mentions all of these incidents. He said, "I tell you what, we're turning into a mob here. And if we continue this, we're just going to collapse as a nation." And he said, "The people hanging from trees were like the Spanish moss. Everywhere you went, you saw these hanging people." And Billie Holiday, we call it Strange Fruit. But he was saying in a way the same things Billie Holiday later said.

Lincoln's Lyceum speech

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DAVID REYNOLDS:

He was just entering the law or just had entered the law. The law really did cultivate and strengthen his analytical abilities, his dependence on reason to evaluate. He said, "I love to tear up a problem and dry out the roots by the fires of my mind, and think things over." And he loved to learn about his opponent's law case just as much as his own law case. He really was learning how to use his

reason, and I think that Lyceum speech reflects that because he praises reason so much and he looks around him, I mean, in the year 1835, for example, there were 140 mob actions, many of them against abolitionists, and it was really the idea of this uncontrolled, irrational mob determining what is going to happen in certain locales rather than the application of laws. He said, "Laws should be our religion. We should follow the law and we should apply our reason and not our mob instincts."

Lincoln's early views on slavery

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DAVID REYNOLDS:

There's no evidence from that, from the 1830s, that he had a really emotional engagement with the issue of slavery. He had an emotional engagement with the specter of all these mobs, many of which were pro-slavery, to be sure. But the emphasis here was really on a rational devotion to what is law and what can be achieved through law, through legal means. His focus... He did say in his proclamation with Dan Stone, he said, "Slavery is an injustice." He does say that. He knows it's an injustice. But in the 1830s, you don't yet get that kind of really, really either emotional or frankly even a deeply moral connection with the slavery issue.

Lincoln's years as a Lawyer

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DAVID REYNOLDS:

After his term in congress, he was a little disillusioned by politics because he had tried to strike a moderate tone on the slavery issue although he had been behind a measure to try to abolish slavery in Washington D.C. that didn't go anywhere, but other than that, he had been a little more reticent on the slavery issue while he was in congress. In the early 1850s, he was trying to resume his law practice and also he had a growing family in Illinois at that time. He was gone for about half of the year on the law circuit because back in those days, the individual town generally didn't have lawyers, so a whole bunch of lawyers would have to travel from town to town to town and he went around the whole– was equivalent to the area of Connecticut, his circuit around Illinois. These were years, but he was really growing at the same time. Why? His law partner, William Herndon was a radical abolitionist and someone who was a big fan, not only of people like Garrison, but also very close by correspondence with the Underground Railroad figure Theodore Parker, who lived in New England. They corresponded a lot.

Also, Herndon had subscribed to many anti-slavery newspapers as well, so when Lincoln went to the office, he often had dialogues about slavery with Herndon. At the same time he was growing culturally, he was expanding his mind. Not so much on the slavery issue, but on the law circuit he was getting exposed to culture on many levels; quite often popular culture. He spent many evenings telling popular jokes and so forth with his fellow lawyers. He would go and hear popular songs and music and theater and everything. In the law office, he would be reading poetry and also reading anti-slavery newspapers and this was also the period when in the early 1850s when that American ant-slavery renaissance peaking with *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, this massive best seller appeared and really created a sea change in popular opinion in the North. There was the Compromise

of 1850, which changed a lot of minds on slavery in the North because that has one of its bills, The Fugitive Slave Act, which plays to new harsh penalties on Northerners who assisted the flight of enslaved people who were trying to come to the North. This outraged many, many people.

DAVID REYNOLDS:

Lincoln hated it. He accepted it because there is a clause in the Constitution that talks about the obligation to return fugitives from labor. He said, "I hate the law, hate it, detest it, but we have to enforce it because it's there in the Constitution." He was a little more conservative on that issue than a lot of people were because a lot of people were, at that point, they just flip flopped and became complete anti-slavery people. As much as he hated it, he wanted to remain within the Constitution and he disagreed with William Seward's notion of higher law because Seward was a politician who later served as Secretary of State under Lincoln, but at the time, he was a senator who said, "There is a higher law than the Constitution, the law of justice to African Americans and we can't observe this horrible fugitive slave act." Lincoln wrote a little marginal thing that said, "I agree with Seward on slavery completely, but I disagree with the concept of the higher law."

Lincoln's increasingly public anti-slavery views

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DAVID REYNOLDS:

There was a growing tension between his inner moral opposition to slavery and the pro-slavery laws that were being passed and not only that, but elements of the Constitution that by some people, were interpreted as being pro-slavery. Particularly the clause about the obligation to return fugitives from labor to their masters. There was that in the Constitution and also three-fifths representation. Southerners could count three-fifths of their enslaved people as representation in congress. There were those two particular elements and he was very aware of them. There was a growing tension within his own psyche between this moral loathing. He said, "I hate slavery as much as any abolitionist." William Lloyd Garrison knew. You can name it. "I hate it," but he was also very, very obliged to adhere to the Constitution and to laws. In 1854 when the Kansas-Nebraska act is passed, authored by Stephen Douglas, a Democrat; Stephen Douglas was really an unabashed racist who was very indifferent about slavery and he was running against Lincoln. He was his chief rival in Illinois and Douglas said, "Oh, just let the Western territories decide for themselves about slavery." Popular sovereignty. In other words, the people of a certain area were sovereign. In Kansas, in Nebraska and everywhere, they can just vote however. It doesn't really matter. It's up to them. Lincoln and the republicans said, "No, no, no, no. We have to stop slavery from spreading where it is." There was this conflict, particularly with the fugitive slave law, which he never... There were other anti-slavery politicians who wanted to firmly come out against it, to very firmly come out against it. He said, "No, I privately hate it. It makes me sick, but we're not going to. We're going to try politically to maybe oppose it." As late as 1858 he said, "Perhaps it'll take 100 years," if you could imagine slavery being around until 1958. He said, "But I want to do it through the political process. I would like to do this through the political process."

DAVID REYNOLDS:

In the 1850s, as much as he hated slavery, he was not willing to go along with the Garrisonian abolitionists because William Lloyd Garrison actually burned the Constitution in public in 1854 at an anti-slavery rally because he considered the Constitution a covenant with death and an agreement with hell because of its pro-slavery clauses. He was still calling for the disunion between the North and the South and Lincoln really wanted to preserve the Constitution, but he also wanted to, and here we get into his own view of the Constitution, he wanted to show how actually if you interpreted it correctly, it was what Frederick Douglass finally called it, "A glorious liberty document." In other words, the actual intention of the founders, even though those that owned people or held people in bondage, the original intention was basically anti-slavery, it was opposed to slavery. Things like the fifth amendment, due process, the natural human right that are announced in the Constitution were themselves anti-slavery, so that at the first republican convention in the mid-1850s, the Republicans said that we believe the Constitution actually embodies the principles of the Declaration of Independence. Lincoln had come to that point, too.

DAVID REYNOLDS:

He called the preamble to the Declaration of Independence, which says “all men are created equal” – we would say all men and women – but all men are created equal "That's my ancient faith. That's my faith." Beginning in 1854, he goes back into history and he says, "Look. The founders were against slavery. You can tell

that by the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, by which they had banned the spread of slavery northwest of the Ohio River. They also wanted to ban the international slave trade by 1808. Those two things proved that they wanted to put slavery on the path of ultimate extinction. If you look at the Constitution itself, it never uses the word slave or slavery and it does use the word persons and the idea of personal rights and human rights are there. He begins, then to try to interpret... He and a bunch of other republicans try to interpret the Constitution as being an anti-slavery document. In that Peoria address of 1854, he's very, very forceful about saying that enslaved people are treated as property, almost as hogs or something like that. He expresses his real disgust with it. Slavery completely violates the spirit of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence.

There, he begins to... He's not quite making a moral pronouncement, yet. He'll do that later on in the Lincoln/Douglas debates of 1858, which was four years later, but he's tending in that direction in the mid 1850s.

DAVID REYNOLDS:

He really hopes that slavery can be cured by the political process and a moral enlightenment of the people of the South, but what really begins to make him make strong moral pronouncements against slavery is the Dred Scott decision of 1857, which says very directly Black people have no rights that white people have to respect and Black people cannot be citizens of the US. At that point, Lincoln says, he uses the metaphor of a prison with a thousand cells and the enslaved person is stuck inside this deep, deep prison with a thousand key holes, each one having a different key to unlock it. He just said the enslaved person is now totally trapped and he frankly doesn't know what to do.

DAVID REYNOLDS:

He clings for a while to colonization. That was the idea that, "Okay, South. What we're going to do is allow you to emancipate your slaves. Maybe we'll compensate you for them and then we're going to deport them or ship them abroad. We're going to transport them abroad to Liberia." That was a conservative position, but it was a very popular one.

DAVID REYNOLDS:

Even Harriet Beecher Stowe at the end of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* has a thing about colonization. People like Henry David Thoreau and also Andrew Jackson, Henry Clay, Daniel Webster. Thomas Jefferson had been for colonization. Very popular idea. Nothing ever came of it. Only about 13,000 American Blacks were actually transported between 1860 and 1865, but it was a way of gradually ridding America of slavery. Lincoln really hated the idea of war. By the late 1850s, after the Dred Scott decision, he really comes out very, very morally opposed to slavery and at that point, he says, "There's, I believe, an absolute right and an absolute wrong and slavery is absolutely wrong. That's the way we republicans feel and we're going to govern our party that way, not that we're going to try to abolish slavery where it already exists, because we can't do that. The Constitution doesn't allow that, but we are going to do what we can to prevent the westward spread of slavery."

DAVID REYNOLDS:

In the course of the 1850s, Lincoln's deep hatred of slavery, which was always there, slowly finds more and more public expression and reaches a peak of eloquence in the Lincoln Douglas debates where he says, "I believe in a right and a wrong and I believe that slavery is a moral and political wrong, to enslave people." He makes that unequivocal and that's not something he would have said explicitly in 1850, so he definitely becomes much more publicly bold in his moral opposition to slavery and not just publicly. I think privately he grows. He grows in his hatred of slavery and his moral opposition to it. I think that inner hatred of slavery strengthens.

The Kansas-Nebraska Act and Lincoln's re-entry into politics

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DAVID REYNOLDS:

The Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 opened up the recently acquired western territories for slavery because it left the decision whether or not people could hold slaves up to the people who actually settled in the western states; the newly formed western states. At the time, there were territories. Kansas territory, Nebraska territory and there were other territories out there, but the idea was popular sovereignty, the idea that the people who lived there were sovereign. They can determine for themselves locally whether or not to have slavery. Lincoln was opposed to that because he felt that, for example, if Kansas went to slavery, it would begin a domino effect whereby many of the western future states would become slave states, each of them having senators and representatives and pretty soon the anti-slavery forces in America would be completely and utterly

outnumbered in Congress. The ‘Slave Power’ would have taken over, so that's why he really objected to the westward spread of slavery.

DAVID REYNOLDS:

In 1854 he reenters politics because he is aroused by the Kansas-Nebraska Act. He suddenly realizes that he has a responsibility to participate in the government. More than that, he's always been quite ambitious. His law partner, William Herndon, said that his ambition was a little engine that never stopped. And his wife, Mary Lincoln, was also very ambitious for him. She was someone who had been raised amid politicians and so forth, so she was pushing him as well and he tries to run for senate in 1854. That doesn't workout, but he attends a lot of Republican conventions. He is considered, he's on the short list, for the Vice Presidency under Frémont. That didn't work out. They chose John McLean instead, but he was very much increasingly known in political circles and more and more in Illinois.

The Lincoln-Douglas debates

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DAVID REYNOLDS:

The Lincoln-Douglas debates occurred in 1858 at a time when a US senate seat from Illinois was up for decision for vote. Stephen Douglas was the leading Democrat, not only of Illinois, but arguably of the nation and he had been the author of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which Lincoln and other Republicans detested because it threatened the westward spread of slavery. Lincoln felt

increasingly compelled in the spring of 1858 to oppose Douglas because he wanted to have a republican, to be the republican as the US senator from Illinois and not Stephen Douglas. He wanted to supplant Douglas, and he quite boldly approached Douglas and asked to have a series of debates around Illinois and Douglas was a little wary at first, but finally they agreed to seven debates; beginning in central Illinois, then going up to northern Illinois, then southern and then back to east central and then across to west central Illinois, criss-crossing the state. These debates were not like today's debates where they're in sound bites.

It was you speak for an hour and I will speak for an hour and then we'll have a rejoinder for half an hour and a rejoinder. This is why they're actually great to read because the real documents of that era, they're not just little flippy sound bites or something like that. They go into real issues. That's why it's just so wonderful to read these debates.

DAVID REYNOLDS:

The debates were an incredible sensation. They were called the best circus in town by one newspaper. You had, "Little Doug," as he was called who was only 5'4 versus tall Abe who was 6'4. It was almost like a Barnum-esque spectacle. Almost a part slug fest and part serious discussion. Yeah, thousands of people would show up. I think the least amount that showed up for a single debate was maybe around 1,500 or 2,000 all around a platform, but it went up to 15 or 20,000 people who would, in some places, would show up for these debates. They didn't have microphones. Their voices had to carry, but people were hanging on every word and Douglas fans would say, "Hit him again! Hit him again!" Lincoln fans would say the same thing back. It was a real, real crowd pleasing performance and

it's amazing today because you wouldn't think that an audience could hang on every word for two or two and a half hours of heavy political discussion, but they were all there really, really responding. Yeah.

DAVID REYNOLDS:

Also, it hit the national media. It really is the thing that puts Lincoln, who before then was relatively unknown, really puts him on the map. Greeley's *Tribune* and many other newspapers around the nation reprint part of the debates, in some cases in Chicago papers, most of the debates, all of the debates. It really gets Lincoln into the political mix.

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DAVID REYNOLDS:

In the Lincoln-Douglas debates, Douglas took the position that the Declaration of Independence, when it said all men are created equal, simply meant all white men and he very explicitly said that the American government is now and should always be run by white men. He accused Lincoln of abolitionizing, hauling a lot of people reluctantly into the anti-slavery Republican party and said there was a conspiracy to do that. Lincoln, in contrast, said "African Americans are included in the Declaration of Independence, the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness and they deserve that every much as I do and as you do, Senator Douglas. And also I am of the party that believes that slavery is an absolute wrong, politically and morally. And you, Mr. Douglas are indifferent, morally indifferent to slavery." And to get back to the contrast, Douglas was trying to use Democratic ideas to support his idea of popular sovereignty, which was the idea

that the people in the different localities should be able to vote by themselves. And he said, "Oh, that's just following American democracy." And Lincoln answered that and said, "Slavery has always been a source of discord in America, it's an injustice. And we can't just comfortably go along with its spread into the Western territories. That the Constitution only permits it where it is. It's a local institution and it's not allowed to spread into the Western territories. "

And he says, "By the way, popular sovereignty, it's totally illogical for you to support that because the Dred Scott decision strips Black people of any rights whatsoever. So people who take them to the West as property, that's their right to do so because Black people don't have any rights under the Dred Scott decision anyway." So he kind of hoisted Douglas on his own petard, so to speak.

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DAVID REYNOLDS:

The debates are the first venue in which Lincoln very clearly and unequivocally expresses his utter moral opposition to slavery. Because previous to that, he had only given out that feeling in more mild terms, but by calling slavery an absolute wrong, if there's anything wrong that slavery is wrong. This is the first time he does it. And then he does it in part because the very venue of being in opposition on the stage to a person, Stephen Douglas, about whom Frederick Douglass, the African-American ex-slave said, "No one has done more damage to African Americans than Stephen Douglas." No one has instilled more racism because Stephen Douglas had a kind of trumpet to the nation. And Frederick Douglas said, "He's done more damage." And I think that really galvanized Lincoln, who was on the stage with him to really crystallize his moral hatred of slavery and just come out and say it. It was a form of both moral ethics and emotion and emotion

as well. I think there was an emotional thing. To that degree, it was a kind of boxing match, a moral boxing match.

DAVID REYNOLDS:

Some people go to the Lincoln-Douglas debates and they cherry pick a passage in which he says, "I have never supported Black people sitting on juries and voting and doing certain other civic duties." Now, the reason that he says, first of all, in the Southern section of Illinois, where there are many more pro-slavery people, but also Steven Douglas with his overt racism has been hounding him left and right about this. And Douglas says ... I mean, Lincoln says, "I frankly don't want to go there." And he says, "One, I've never supported Black people being on juries." And he goes down a certain list, but he doesn't in a kind of grocery list of fashion. Whereas, when Douglas talks about race and he is racist, Stephen Douglas. He's very emotional. I mean, he's really for whites and against Black people. But Lincoln kind of gives this obligatory, he says, "I didn't want to really spend any time on this." And he was running for office. This is where his ambition comes in. Actually, he was running for office and he had to get some votes. And Illinois was a state, which in 1853 had passed a law that Frederick Douglass called the worst Black Law of any law in the whole US. And by this law, if you were a free African-American and you had not lived in Illinois previously, you couldn't enter the state and stay for more than 10 days. Now, if you did, you were subject to a stiff fine, a $50 fine, which back then was a lot of money, or you could be thrown into jail or physically transported out of the state.

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DAVID REYNOLDS:

So that was the kind of atmosphere in which Lincoln was speaking. So this obligatory, this almost grocery lists. And also notice that in that grocery list, he never says in the future I'm going to change my mind. He eventually became the first president to endorse the vote for African-Americans publicly. He says, "I never have supported the vote for African-Americans." He almost puts it in the past tense at that point.

The tension between Lincoln's morality and political ambition

00:53:33:00

DAVID REYNOLDS:

Lincoln was a very ambitious politician running for office in the late 1850s, running for senator, and really wanted that position, was running against Stephen Douglas at the time. Might've had his eye eventually on the presidency, but certainly he wanted to win office at that time but he was struggling in the middle of Illinois, which was a largely conservative area. It wasn't as conservative as Southern Illinois, but he had to appear quite often in middle Illinois and in Southern Illinois in the Lincoln, Douglas debates. And to do that, he had to appear to be more moderate actually, than he was. Just to gain office, he had to restrain to some degree, his inner loathing of slavery and his strongest statement against slavery and his strongest expression of his moral hatred of slavery comes at the very end. Now, if he had begun the debates with that, no doubt Steven Douglas would have piled on him throughout the debates, but really at the end, he comes out the way he really feels. But before that, he strikes a more moderate pose,

particularly when he's speaking in Southern Illinois or even in central Illinois. So it shows you his ambition to win votes in a way kept under control his inner passion against slavery.

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DAVID REYNOLDS:

Somebody said about Abraham Lincoln, someone who was close to him, said that he was inwardly truly radical. And which means that he was inwardly truly a radical abolitionist. An abolitionist who wanted the emancipation of the enslaved four million people. However, to get ahead, particularly in the conservative atmosphere of Illinois, he had to muffle and restrain that inner radicalism and put on a pose of moderation and sometimes even conservatism in order to win votes. So in that sense, he was a little bit like Walt Whitman, who said, "Be radical, be radical, be radical, be not too damned radical." Because if you're too damned radical, you're just going to alienate a lot of voters. And Lincoln was really very much that way, particularly when he was running for office, both in Illinois and also for the presidency in 1860.

John Brown's raid

00:56:56:00

DAVID REYNOLDS:

John Brown was a Northern abolitionist who believed that he had been appointed by God to wipe out slavery. He was very religious and with a band of 19 or so followers invaded the South. A slave region of the South in Virginia with the idea

of sparking slave rebellion, a local one. That he hoped would then trigger a larger slave rebellion throughout the South. What happened however, is that Brown and his men were captured at Harpers Ferry. They raided Harpers Ferry, which was an arsenal where they were going to gather guns and then go to the mountains and create kind of cells along the Appalachian Mountains that stretch into the South and create a kind of terror campaign. But instead of doing that, they got captured at the arsenal, trapped. And eventually they were brought to trial and John Brown and five others were hanged. They were hanged. And it was important to the South because the South had always said those evil, wicked abolitionists want to break the law and just want to ... They're not going to let us alone. They're not going to let us alone. They're eventually going to come down here and they're going to create mayhem down here. And John Brown is just a representative of the Republican party and the anti-slavery people of the North. In the North, on the other hand, suddenly a lot of people who were not that radical were radicalized by John Brown because here was a man who stood up to the South very bravely. Went down there, perhaps knowing he could be captured and executed, but nevertheless gave his life for enslaved people. And Frederick Douglass said, "I lived for people of my race. John Brown died for people of my race."

DAVID REYNOLDS:

So for a lot of Northerners, John Brown became a Christ figure. Someone who had sacrificed his life for the enslaved millions. And when the South started charging the Northern Republican party for John Brown's action, the South was really falsifying the situation because Republicans really believed in politics. They didn't believe in this kind of vigilante picking up arms and making war on

the South. They really believed in politics, but the southerners said, William Henry Seward and Salmon Chase and everybody in the Republican party, they're the ones who are culpable because they knew the Republicans were very strong in the North. And they wanted to tar the Republican party with the wickedness of John Brown.

01:00:18:00

DAVID REYNOLDS:

Lincoln, like many other Republicans backed off from John Brown because Lincoln sincerely did not believe in the higher law. And in going beyond the Constitution and committing violence to get what you want done, to get that done. And he was giving a speech in Kansas about the same time that John Brown was being hanged, which was in early December 1859. And he was there in Kansas. And he said, " What John Brown did was very generous, unselfish. I agree with his attitude about slavery. However, what he did was against the law, it was lawless." And he said, "There were no Republicans at Harpers Ferry where John Brown had attacked." And it's true. John Brown actually disdained the Republican party. He thought they were just all talk and no action, all talk and no action. And it's very true that there weren't Republicans directly involved in the Harpers Ferry raid. So Lincoln expresses admiration for the goals of John Brown, but utterly disagreed with his tactics, his violent tactics.

DAVID REYNOLDS:

It's tempting to hold Lincoln morally culpable, because he didn't go as far as somebody like John Brown who was so self-sacrificing and so sympathetic to enslaved people that he gave up his life for them. And we can ask ourselves why

didn't Abraham Lincoln do that? Don't we charge him a little bit for being maybe too moderate? And my answer to that is that the whole situation with slavery, anytime you went beyond the law, Lincoln knew that the higher law could either go in the direction of let's say John Brown, but it could also go in another direction – it could go in the direction of the pro-slavery Southern position, because increasingly the South was saying, "Slavery is not just a positive, good, it's a divine institution. Most of the patriarchs in the Bible owned slaves. Some of them owned thousands of slaves and our form of slavery brings African people over to America and exposes them to Western civilization." That was their higher law. And John Brown's higher law was slavery is such an evil institution that I'm going to break the law and go down there and I'm going to free the slaves myself. And indeed, John Brown throughout history has been supported by killers of abortion doctors in the name of John Brown. Oh well, if John Brown did it, I can go kill an abortion doctor or something like that. So the higher law becomes a slippery slope. So once you do go beyond the law, suddenly you could be either down here with the South, you could be up here with John Brown. And Lincoln is very much in the middle saying, "As much as I agree with John Brown, I can't go as far as that."

P.T. Barnum and the culture of spectacle

01:04:11:00

DAVID REYNOLDS:

P.T. Barnum was the first great showman. He's the first one who popularized the phrase show business, show business. Beginning in the 1830s, put on exhibit a

161 year old woman, African-American woman named Joyce Heff. And he made a lot of money off of her. He said that she had been the nanny of George Washington. Turns out her autopsy showed she was only in her '70s but he was the master of humbug. And he would produce ... Another exhibit was the Fiji mermaid, which in posters was this beautiful curvaceous, blonde, half-naked woman. And people would flock in to see the Fiji: it was a monkey's torso sewn to a salmon's tail and suspended in liquid with a little blonde wig on it. I mean, he was full of hoaxes. He loved to humbug the people, and he would put on display the biggest, the fattest, the tallest. He had on display Siamese twins, people that were connected and everything like that. But he helped to create the culture of spectacle. And in a few ways, Lincoln kind of fed into this. He loved to joke about his own ugliness. He wasn't really that ugly, but everyone called him baboon, just about everybody. An ape and everything. He had had kind of a cragged face, and sort of unkempt hair and cavernous features. And he kind of walked in this kind of flat-footed way and kind of hunched over a little bit. But he liked to tell jokes about how he was the ugliest guy around, and he even put on what journalists called an “assumed clownishness.” Particularly early in a speech, he would kind of pull his suspenders a little bit or pull his lapels and kind of say, "Mr. Chairman." In, kind of, in his Indiana accent. Now, by the end of the speech, usually people thought he was kind of like a caterpillar, butterfly because by the end of the speech, he was blossoming and so forth. But he often would draw people in with his own physical sort of oddities and a lot of the younger people liked to go see him for that.

DAVID REYNOLDS:

The fact that he could assume a kind of clownishness and sometimes Hawthorne said he exaggerated his own homeliness. It showed that he was kind of aware of this exhibition culture of curiosities and of oddities and so forth and what I call the "-est factor." The biggest, the ugliest, the fattest and so forth. Today, we don't really do that kind of thing in that sort of way. We have our own forms of sensationalism, of course, but still, that was in a very obvious way. And he really sort of played into that culture of image and spectacle.

Lincoln's frontier image in the 1860 Election

01:07:39:00

DAVID REYNOLDS:

The 1860 election is when "Abe "was born – "Abe." He didn't like to be called Abe. He preferred to be called Lincoln. He didn't even like Mr. President when he became president or anything like that, or Abraham. He just liked Lincoln, not Abe. But he said, "Without the image of Abe, "honest old Abe," "uncle Abe," I was not going to be elected." And indeed in 1860 during the election, during the race, he was championed as "Honest Abe," "Uncle Abe" and "Abe, the Illinois rail splitter." And the way that began is in one of the conventions, a relative of his brought into the convention, a couple of rails, fence rails that he had split when he had been a frontiersman long ago. By this time Lincoln was a respectable lawyer, had been that way for over 20 years and he wore suits and everything, but suddenly the whole cultural scene exploded with images of Abe, the Illinois rail splitter with his ax cutting the rail. And quite often the rail was the democratic party because the democratic party split in half because of his candidacy. And suddenly frontier images were everywhere. There's several newspapers called The

Rail Splitter and his own office was filled with things that were sent to him having to do with the forest and rail splitting. And also there was a popular song called “Lincoln and Liberty” by the Beatles of the day called the Hutchinson Family Singers. And it was called the song that got Lincoln elected, but about how he was the ax wielder, who is great at felling trees and splitting rails and just the regular frontiersman. And that had been tried before, that frontier image on William Henry Harrison in 1840 in the log cabin campaign. The trouble is, is that Harrison had lived in a 16 room mansion in the Midwest. It wasn't the real thing. In the case of Lincoln, he could say it's really the real thing. He had split thousands of rails at one point in his life. He was from a one-room log cabin. You can honestly say that about him. So there was a certain connection there between the image and the reality.

DAVID REYNOLDS:

He very much leaned into the image. And he came out and said, "I won that election on the image of “Abe,” of the “Railsplitter Abe. “ The informal down-home frontier image. He knew that. Yeah.

Political cartoons and punditry

01:10:41:00

DAVID REYNOLDS:

Today, we are so accustomed to images flying at us from all over, all kinds of images – ads and TV and internet and everything – that we're not accustomed to

thinking about an era when photography was brand new. It had been invented really in 1839, and it didn't become popular until much later. There were some photographs taken and everything. So a lot of visual representation depended on cartoons or lithographs, lithograph paintings or cartoons. And that's why political cartoons had such a great effect in that era because they were still somewhat unique and still somewhat striking. For example, there was a cartoon, a quite racist cartoon, against– there were many cartoons against Lincoln, and one was called “What Is It?” And Barnum that year in 1860, the year of the election, had put on display in his museum an African-American teenager with a tapered cranium who Barnum stripped him almost naked and presented him as what is it? He was supposedly a creature brought from Africa who was the link between the ape and the human being. And people would come and it was very, very racist. But a cartoonist put Lincoln beside this “What is it?” And looking down at this African-American and saying, "Here would be my wonderful successor, this noble and great creature here. And so glorious," and everything. A vicious cartoon, but a lot of people saw these cartoons. There were several other cartoons that were even more racist than that. And there were a good number of pro-Lincoln cartoons as well, but in a way, it was a battle of the political cartoonists to a great degree.

Charles Blondin

01:13:05:00

DAVID REYNOLDS:

Charles Blondin was a masterly tightrope performer who crossed Niagara Falls many times. Normally, he did it backwards. He did it on four foot stilts. He did it in chains. He did it at night. And one of the toughest things, he put his agent on his back, 170 pound man, and walked across Niagara Falls. It's 1200 feet across. I mean it was not easy. And he told his agent, "Just keep still, don't move." He also pushed a wheelbarrow across, pushing a lot of things in the wheelbarrow.

But Lincoln was almost instantly connected with Blondin. First, by cartoonists. Many cartoonists said, "This is Lincoln. He's right in the middle. He's right in the center. He's balanced right in the center crossing Niagara Falls," Niagara Falls being American culture at that time.

DAVID REYNOLDS:

More than once, he was approached by people who were frustrated that he wasn't more explicitly anti-slavery in his public pronouncements. And he knew how deep the divisions in the nation as a whole were, and also even in the North. And he told them, " If I were Blondin crossing Niagara, would you tell me to lean left, lean right? No. You would allow me to stick exactly on the center where I am, otherwise I would tumble off, fall off into Niagara Falls and we'd be really in the chaos here. I have to stay centrally positioned exactly where I am. I have to be Blondin."

DAVID REYNOLDS:

And he said to another group, who made a similar demand, said, "Imagine I'm Blondin again, and I'm pushing my wheelbarrow across Niagara Falls. The

wheelbarrow contains the entire American future in it. And you're going to tell me to hop up and down or hop left or hop right? You're going to allow me to stay exactly where I am, because in a divided time, the worst thing I can do is further inflame the divisions, further inflame the divisions. I'm going to stay exactly where I am and I'll keep pressing for justice. But there are certain things I just can't do because I would make a bad situation even worse."

DAVID REYNOLDS:

The fact that he identified with Blondin and stuck to the center, despite his inward, what we would call, left leaning radicalism, means that he had his eye on the entire nation. He did not want to make a very divided nation even more divided, even more fragmented. He wanted to hold the nation together as much as he could in a time when it was even more severely divided than in recent years. It was so deeply, deeply divided. And he knew that if he went into any extreme either way in either direction, that he would disrupt the nation further and deepen the division.

DAVID REYNOLDS:

He was not the great divider. He was ultimately the great unifier. Even in a speech like the Peoria speech of 1854, he said, "If we were southerners, we'd feel the same way they do." And even during the Civil War, he never explicitly castigated or made fun of Southern people who were fighting against him. He would call them rebels, he would call them even the enemy and so forth, but he didn't go on and on to criticize the opposition whatsoever. He always tried to embrace the

other side, even as he was waging war. He was waging war to repair the Union, to get the Union back together. And ultimately, he was waging a war for a union completely without slavery as well. So yeah, he was not a divisive figure at all, he was a unifier.

B’hoys’ and Lincoln’s appeal to the working class

01:18:10:00

DAVID REYNOLDS:

The b'hoy, that was the nickname for working class Americans. It arose in the 1840s in street language. It's also called the Bowery Boy, and the b'hoy had his g'hal. These were the average working class Americans of that day, the butchers, the day laborers and so forth. And the b'hoy was also always a volunteer fireman, like to rush to fires. Kind of rough, like to get in a mus, which was a fight. But at the same time, good-hearted and also like to attend Shakespeare plays and was acute, that meant acute, shrewd. Shrewd, street-smart. And in the 1840s, Lincoln said, "We have to win over the shrewd, wild boys about town." And he's talking about the b'hoys, the average working class types. And at that time, he was campaigning for Zachary Taylor. But then later, when he's running for office himself in 1860, suddenly he starts giving talks to largely younger audiences. And a lot of these people are rough types. By then, the working class which previously in the North had been largely racist, a lot of them had really been converted to an anti-slavery position. The b'hoy, the working class had largely– due to things like *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and a lot of abolitionist speeches, and also the pro-slavery laws– that really soured a lot of people on slavery, including the Northern

working class. So by that time, when he spoke to average working class Americans, he could really identify with them. And Walt Whitman in the mid 1850s had tried to appeal to that audience.

DAVID REYNOLDS:

He said, "I'm Walt Whitman. One of the roughs, drinking, breeding, turbulent." Walt Whitman was none of those things. None. None. Not turbulent, didn't drink, didn't breed. But he wanted to be one of the b'hoys. And the first three reviews of *Leaves of Grass*, his poetry, poem, this is the b'hoy poet. This is the Bowery Boy. Now, Whitman, his poetry didn't have the effect that he wanted to have. And he said, "I want a working class figure to come from across the Alleghenies," because by then, the b'hoy had become a national figure, "To include the Hoosiers in Indiana, the Suckers of Illinois," they were called Suckers in Illinois. Lincoln was called a sucker, that was the state name for a working class figure in Illinois. Comes from a fish, the sucker. Anyway, it was like a national type. And Whitman said, "I want a working class guy to come across the Alleghenies and come into the White House." And four years later, lo and behold, there comes Lincoln, the Railsplitter, the b'hoy, the sucker. And he had been both a Hoosier and a sucker. And he was known that way. So he was the b'hoy on the mass level. And he appealed to this young America, which had formerly been owned by Stephen Douglas. Stephen Douglas was such a brash pertinacious guy who swore a lot, used slang and everything. He was the big attractor of the b'hoys. But suddenly, they were flocking to Lincoln who gave a lecture on young America and our great young Americans, he gave that lecture in the late 1850s. And suddenly, he was surrounded by a group called the Wide Awakes. The Wide Awakes were like the

b'hoys, but they were now disciplined behind Lincoln. And they would dress up in their oil skin coats and go around. We don't like this today, but they would go around with torches at night. But they were all for Lincoln and for liberty and for freeing the slaves. But suddenly, the b'hoys became young America and they became totally Republican, at least the Northern ones, behind Lincoln. And they really, really helped get him elected.

Lincoln's broad cultural appeal

01:23:08:00

DAVID REYNOLDS:

Lincoln spanned cultural levels, perhaps more than any president that I'm aware of. Emerson, a contemporary of his, said that there's one hero in America who stands out for spanning the different levels, from the very highest to the very lowest until, as Emerson said, the very dogs believe in him. He, on the one hand, enjoyed opera, he also enjoyed Shakespeare. How many people do we know who can literally recite Shakespeare by the page? He could read a few passages of Shakespeare and he had such a hard disk up here that they stuck there. And he would recite Shakespeare not because he was trying to brag at a cocktail party, these passages meant something to him. They meant something to him.

They expressed certain emotions that were there and they expressed it better than anything else did. The same with Robert Burns. He loved Robert Burns and he could recite Robert Burns, again, not at all to impress people, he would do it spontaneously. But he also recited a lot of very low, popular humor, frontier humor. He loved to read joke books and he said, "Most of my stories, I tell a lot of

stories, but well over 60% of them are borrowed stories. I borrowed them from joke books." From joke books, just common joke books. He said, "Actually, if you heard some of my stories, I think hold your nose, and they stink a little."

DAVID REYNOLDS:

But really and everything in between. He also was a sucker, and who isn't, for sentimental songs, but he was a real sucker for... His favorite song was called “20 Years Ago,” and going back to the village, where he grew up and seeing the sights. But everything's the same in a sense, but everything is gone too. He was obsessed by mortality and transience and all of that. But it's a very sappy sentimental song. But he loved that. He loved “Home Sweet Home, “which is a very sappy song. So yeah. But he really keyed into so many different levels. And to me, what was most attractive about it, there was something very natural about it. He wasn't on the one hand slumming and saying, " Oh, I have to know popular culture," and he was not on the other hand saying, "I think I'm going to try to appear as a smart alec here." He did it out of feeling. He honestly loved these different levels of culture and he got involved in them. And to me, that partly explains his incredibly democratic outreach.

Lincoln’s openness to the public and soldiers

01:26:25:00

DAVID REYNOLDS:

His conduct during the war really profited and grew from his democratic understanding of different levels of culture. And he was a president who needed to have direct contact with average people. He held what were called levees, which almost every other day in the White House, he would have people come in and he would talk to average people. Nowadays, we can't do that. But back then, people would literally line up and for a couple of hours at a time, quite often in both the morning and in the afternoon, they would come and they would talk with them. They would share their stories. They would sometimes make requests. Sometimes they drove him a little batty with their requests, but... And he called these his public opinion baths, like he was taking a bath in the people. And his male secretaries, John Hay and John Nicolay, got a little frustrated because he wanted to do this so often. And yet, they said he depends on this. He depends on the direct contact with the people. And toward the ordinary soldiers, he liked to visit soldiers, ordinary soldiers. And he felt a human contact with him. And it was the obligation of the army back then that if you deserted from the army, you were deserter, technically you should be shot, executed. And they used to shoot deserters just across the Potomac from the White House. And in the distance, Lincoln could hear the shooting and he used to get very emotional. He tried to pardon as many deserters as he could, but he got a reputation as being a little too forgiving of deserters. But more than once, he would go to the window and start crying about the fact that these poor soldiers had to be shot.

DAVID REYNOLDS:

And when he went to the field, the field meaning the army camps, he made a point of greeting the soldiers, not just the generals, but the soldiers. And he would

go through the hospitals. And one day, he went through a hospital and he made a point, and it was a very, very large hospital. There were thousands... It covered several acres. He went to every bed and he shook the hand of every soldier.

And there were even some Confederate wounded in there, he even shook their hand. He shook the hands of the Confederates, the wounded Confederate soldiers. And nobody could really keep up with him. I mean by the end of the day, everybody else was exhausted, but he wanted to make that contact. So to me, that's a very, very human side of him that really comes from his outreach to the people and to their culture. He wasn't a snob about it or whatever. This person's from a certain background, this person's Irish. He got along with Jewish people, with Catholics, with Irish, with African-Americans, I mean with people of all faiths and ethnicities. He didn't have barriers in that sense.

Lincoln's early life

01:30:09:00

DAVID REYNOLDS:

Lincoln was born in a one-room log cabin in Kentucky on property that his father had bought. And later on, Lincoln said that we had to leave Kentucky when Lincoln was quite young because of two reasons, because of real estate and slavery. Now, the real estate situation had to do with this. Kentucky had once been an extension of Virginia. And what happened is a lot of Eastern buyers bought up a lot of land out in what later became Kentucky. And they claimed ownership. They would buy 10,000 acres at a time, that kind of thing. And so, but then later explorers and settlers moved to Kentucky and purchased this land and it began a

process of what was called shingling. So that technically the original owner owned the land and yet these people bought the property. It became, and sometimes properties were shingled several times where other buyers would come in and buy it. But the initial purchaser was completely left out and it became a kind of quick sand situation of real estate. And finally, Thomas Lincoln, even though he had accumulated a couple of hundred acres of land by the end, because they moved a couple of times within Kentucky, ended up indebted, technically indebted, to the original owner of the land. And he had a lien on the land and he literally had to sort of escape. The same thing happened to Daniel Boone who was a frontiersman. He moved there and he was living on this so-called shingled land. And he eventually had to move out of state, too. So, that was one.

DAVID REYNOLDS:

Even though Thomas Lincoln never went on record as far as we know on the slavery issue, we do know that he was part of a Baptist sort of sect that broke off from the regular Baptist church because this small sect was anti-slavery. The preachers were emancipationists. And so young Abraham Lincoln was raised in a basically emancipationist, abolitionist household. And his father who has gotten frankly kind of a bad rap from historians and biographers. And in part, because he was fundamentally illiterate or only basically literate, he was not a book reader and so forth. And people say that he sort of enslaved the young Abe by making him work for the family and everything. But the fact is, is that frontier families – that's what you did, particularly the male children, worked for the family until they were 21. And school was not that important at that point. And the father was actually known, to people who actually knew him, as an upstanding moral person. A good person who kind of took life easy, was not materialistic.

01:33:40:00

DAVID REYNOLDS:

I do believe that he was fundamentally anti-slavery. And when Lincoln, who said, "I can never recall a moment in my entire life when I did not hate slavery," was not opposed to slavery. And when he looked back on childhood, he said, "I had a joyous, happy childhood in spite of our pinched circumstances." No, they never became wealthy. They kind of had a subsistence lifestyle, but if you were living on the frontier back then even during the Depression of 1819, even if the economy was sinking, you could live fairly well. If you were living off the land.

If you had a subsistence lifestyle, you could survive. You could live off the land. You grew your own vegetables and made your own food and stored it and everything. And through barter, you didn't even always need money through barter. You could trade some corn for the cloth and that kind of thing. So we think of Lincoln from being this kind of squalid poverty-stricken background, but Lincoln didn't really feel it that way. He basically looked back with happiness on his childhood.

DAVID REYNOLDS:

There was kind of a difference between finances and class because what was happening in the East Coast where they did not live, there was increasing capitalism. And yes, America was increasingly defined by success, by material accumulation. But if you lived on the frontier or on the farm, you weren't quite as conscious of that as you were if you were engaged in the whole kind of capitalist rat race. You were much more self-sufficient. And it's kind of funny that Henry

David Thoreau, he was raised in kind of a middle-class, he went to Harvard, raised in a middle-class village. And he felt he had to move to a single room log cabin to confront to engage in what he called the wild, contact with the wild and everything. Lincoln had contact with the wild from during most of his childhood. He had done his Thoreau bit already. He had lived in the single room log cabin and he was very accustomed to that. And he was naturally anti-materialistic. Lincoln was never, he was very ambitious, but he was never into things, accumulating things or status symbols or something material status symbols, or something like that. He had kind of a natural connection, I think, with the earth. He was almost like Henry David Thoreau without having to train for it, so to speak.

Thomas Lincoln and the "free labor" of enslaved people

01:37:00:00

DAVID REYNOLDS:

There can be no doubt that Thomas Lincoln, even though he never left on record any moral comment on slavery, opposed slavery in part, because of the competition in his area of Kentucky. Because in his region, about half of the workers were enslaved people. They were enslaved and they were free labor. Thomas Lincoln, like any other free worker had to charge for his services. He was a good worker. He was a good carpenter. He was a good farmer. He was quite practical, but he did face the competition. And so moving to Indiana was moving to a place where slavery was banned. It was moving to, it was on the verge and it did soon, it was on the verge, it was moving toward banning slavery. And it

officially does that shortly after Thomas Lincoln takes his family there. So there's no doubt that he was in a way on a more level playing field as a worker, the father, than he had been in Kentucky, where a lot of the workers were "free labor." They were enslaved, but they did their "labor" for free.

Lincoln and Ann Rutledge

01:38:44:00

DAVID REYNOLDS:

Lincoln was periodically beset by what we would call depression, what in that era was called hypochondria. So when he said, "I have the hypo," that's when he was depressed, and it struck him particularly hard in the 1830s when he was in his twenties because there were several, a combination of events and mental processes that he was going through in his personal life that I think caused this. One of them was certainly the death of Ann Rutledge to whom if he were not officially engaged to, at least sort of promised to the understanding they were going to get married. Although it was complicated by the fact that she had promised herself to someone who had left New Salem and was going to come back in a couple of years. But still, they had an understanding relationship with each other. But then in the summer of 1835, she died of typhoid and Lincoln at that point fell into a depression, certainly a depression in which the friends had to hide knives from him and razors and so forth. He was very, very sad. Couldn't stand the thought of the elements, the rain beating on the grave of his beloved Ann Rutledge.

DAVID REYNOLDS:

He was in love with Ann Rutledge. That was disputed for a while. That's a whole story of its own whereby his law partner, William Herndon shortly after his death, said that he was only in love with Ann Rutledge for his entire life and never loved Mary Todd Lincoln, his own wife. That was a complete exaggeration. And then it built to the effect that his depression, his fondness for Ann Rutledge and his loss of Ann Rutledge fueled his greatness. Why? Because it made him so sensitive and so compassionate to suffering people. She had suffered and she had died. He had loved her, she had died. That she was literally the fountainhead of his notion of malice toward none charity to all. That was in the 1930s and films and everything where she became like the saintly mother of America. Then that toppled when some people doubted that he had a deep relationship with her at all. This was in the 1940s. James Randall said that there is no evidence at all. It's been reconstructed so recently we know that he had an affair, not an affair in our sense, a romantic relationship with Anne Rutledge. He did love her.

01:42:08:00

DAVID REYNOLDS:

That he did become depressed after her death. It's not thought that this had a life defining effect on him, but it was one of an accumulating encounters with death, of people close to him beginning with his beloved mother who had died when he was quite young. With his sister, Sally, who had died in childbirth in the 1820s. Then Ann Rutledge passes away. So it was a... Plus he was obsessed by mortality anyway. His favorite was called *Mortality* by William Knox and it's 36 lines long and he memorized the whole thing. And it was all about how, no matter how great you are, whether you're a king or president or even a common person, you're

going to die, or a beautiful maiden. You're going to end up in the earth. You're going to die. And there's no mention of heaven or the afterlife in there.

Lincoln's depression and obsession with mortality

01:43:23:00

DAVID REYNOLDS:

I think instead of just Ann Rutledge, we can just say in general he was haunted – particularly as a young man in New Salem and in Illinois with death – with transience, with the fact that we don't last long on this earth. And I think that that really spurred his ambition because it was about that time that he gets heavily involved in law and politics. So he had the other side that it kind of fed into his depression, kind of fed into his sort of hyperactivity in the law, in law and in politics. He was supposed to be running for state office at the same time that he was a very active lawyer who sometimes while he handled a total of 5,100 cases over the course of his career. And sometimes he was doing 11 cases in one day.

So I think in a sense, his melancholy then, he found a certain cure or relief for his melancholy in his engagement with the law. Which after all is a very rational, you have to be very rational in the law. Or in politics where you have to be on your feet. You have to be engaged with the discussion and with the issues at hand. So I think in a way his melancholy kind of fed into that. He went through another very, very severe phase of the hypo around the time when he was engaged to Mary Todd.

DAVID REYNOLDS:

And some people say he was having second doubts about Mary Todd. We know that he did break it off with Mary Todd temporarily, it is true. And he did go through a severe depression shortly after he broke it off. The exact reasons why he fell into depression. I think it was partly his conflicted feelings at that particular moment about Mary Todd, but also some of the programs he had been implementing as a politician, as a state politician, came to naught. He had pushed through the state legislature this huge infrastructure bill, very expensive, very ambitious, but the state, partly as a result of the Panic of 1837, one of the worst depressions that America has yet experienced – well until the Great Depression it was. Anyway, the state went bankrupt and all those plans collapsed at the same time where he was going through this sort of rocky moment with Mary Todd. So I think that that kind of gathered together and contributed to a very severe moment where he said, "I feel as so miserable that if my current state of mind were distributed throughout the entire human race, everyone would be totally miserable."

DAVID REYNOLDS:

At that moment, his friends, well, a couple of them really thought that he had permanently gone off the deep end and they had to hide, again, knives and razors for fear that he could commit suicide. He had written a poem in 1838 called, he wrote three poems that were published. One which was called *The Suicide's Soliloquy*, about a guy who's alone in the woods. All that's around are some wolves and some night birds and that kind of thing. And he has a knife. And it's about his last moments, about he's given up on life and he stabs himself in the heart. And that's the way the poem ends. So yeah, he did go through moments of depression. Those two moments are pretty well recorded from primary sources.

And then also- but once he gets into law and then he's married, he's raising a family, the times that he falls into the deepest depression are when he loses his first son, Eddie who dies shortly before his third birthday. And the death of Eddie almost totally incapacitates Mary, his wife. And it sends him, both into kind of a depression but at the same time reaching out to religion at that point. He goes to a minister and he even goes to some spiritualists, who were people who got in touch with the afterlife and everything. So there's that moment. And then later on during the White House. So when the 11 year old Willie dies, that's a moment when he falls into severe depression. And not only that, but he had very long periods of what neuroscientists would call the default mode. The default mode is what we think of commonly as like daydreaming. And so a lot of times he would just kind of sit there and meditate and kind of be almost in a half daze. And even his friends would say, "Oh, hi Lincoln." And he wouldn't respond. And they thought that, what is this guy really spaced out here or something? What's happening? But I think in those moments, the default mode can be also very, very creative. So I think in many of those moments, he wasn't so much depressed as he was kind of lost in his thoughts and kind of rambling thoughts. And default mode can be very, very creative. I think he was generating thoughts at those moments.

Lincoln's personal suffering and his compassion

01:49:29:00

DAVID REYNOLDS:

There's a certain wisdom in tragedy. He loved Shakespearian tragedy. And when he went through a period of skepticism and doubt of religion, when he was quite

young in his twenties, it was his very doubt that fed into his melancholy. But at the same time, it created what I call a kind of cosmic democracy, a compassion for all people. It's almost as though we're all in this together and yes, we're all going to die. We all suffer before we die and then we die. But in a sense that also bonds us. And I think during the Civil War, he was seeing death so often and he lost such a close friend early on, Colonel Edward Baker, who died at Ball's Bluff. And he lost several other people that were close to him, including Willy, but also soldiers he knew, generals he knew. But I think it did generate even a certain acuity. The word wasn't used back then, but today we might almost call it a kind of existential acuity. A kind of, "It's pretty dark out there, but I'm going to kind of get beyond this. I'm going to do something about it." I think it really fed into his pragmatism and his ability to handle situations. Because there always was that rational side to him that was allowed to kick in. And I think that in a way, his reason and his creativity were in a sense fed by a sense of tragedy and even by his depression.

Lincoln's melancholy and his compassion

01:51:32:00

DAVID REYNOLDS:

In the case of Lincoln – it's not always true about every person, for some people – depression becomes chronic and quite limiting. And the ability to even conduct normal life, let alone create. In his case, it fed into kind of a meditative and contemplative and thoughtful approach to the world. He kind of built from his depression and then his humor because he loved, in certain situations, to tell story after story on when he was on the law circuit that often sit around in a circle and

"Okay, Lincoln, you tell a story. And then Johnny over here would tell his story." And then they'd riff off each other and they would laugh and they'd spend the whole evening just telling stories, very sociable and very happy and fun. And yet the next day he could be in a kind of depression. But he was a man of contradictions. And he makes me think of Walt Whitman, who said, "Do I contradict myself. Very well then, I contradict myself. I am large. I contain multitudes. I contain multitudes." Lincoln was someone who contained multitudes as a politician.

DAVID REYNOLDS:

And yes, his moods often did contradict each other, but they fed into each other so that his awareness of the darker side of life in a way put into relief the brighter side of life. So he could talk about the “better angels of our nature.” And because he did have this kind of human identification with flawed humanity. And with mortal humanity, the humanity that dies, he could extend charity to all, malice toward none. So really in a sense, the optimistic side of his nature and the deeply compassionate side of his nature springs from the melancholy side.

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