TED WIDMER
LINCOLN'S DILEMMA
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

Ted Widmer Interview
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Interviewed by Jackie Olive & Barak Goodman
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SPEAKER 1:

Edward Widmer interview, take one. Marker.

The heightening conflicts around slavery

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EDWARD WIDMER:

Slavery is being talked about as it never has been in the late 1850s with higher volume, higher level of anger and just much less room to negotiate the way Northerners and Southerners had been negotiating since the creation of the country, but they're running out of wiggle room. Anger's rising in the North to be sure, but it's also rising in the South and there's a a legend that the North was aggressively trying to end slavery. The reality is the South was aggressively trying to expand slavery in the late 1850s. Famously in the Dred Scott decision of 1857, the Supreme Court delivered an extreme verdict that African-Americans would never have any rights ever in the United States of America. And that was a real wake up call for moderates in the North who felt that there was a kind of right wing takeover of the United States. It seemed like a fix was in between the new president, James Buchanan, and the Supreme Court that delivered that verdict. They were known to be communicating letters and messages and whispering to each other the day Buchanan was inaugurated.

The Kansas-Nebraska Act

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EDWARD WIDMER:

The Kansas-Nebraska Act angered people in the North and in the West, and I would imagine even some in the South because it broke all of the previous generation's promises. The South had over and over again said it would be satisfied with certain compromises, the Missouri Compromise of 1821 and then the set of compromises of 1850. And the South had always said, this is the last time we're going to ask for you to carve out this exception for us. And the North had agreed. Even though the North had way more people and more business and was driving prosperity much more than the South, the South always had more political power and it would carve out these exceptions for itself and then violate the agreement five or ten years later.

EDWARD WIDMER:

So to someone like Abraham Lincoln who was for all intents and purposes retired from politics when Kansas-Nebraska comes through in 1854, it was an outrageous violation of decorum and of the idea that honorable politicians from different sections of the country could make meaningful agreements with each other. It just seemed like they would do whatever they wanted to do. They would run roughshod over any agreement that North signed up for. It was also a sign of unscrupulous ambitious politicians from the North as well, willing to look away as these promises were forgotten. So Lincoln was angry at Stephen Douglas, Senator from Illinois, whom he'd known a long, long time, for being a participant in the breaking of all of these older promises.

The sectional politics of slavery's expansion

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EDWARD WIDMER:

Lincoln had said, "A house divided against itself cannot stand," which implied that, and he said that the country would not be both things for that much longer. It would be all one thing or all the other. He was conveniently vague on the timeline and other politicians, William Seward, had used the phrase "irrepressible conflict." So many people felt that it was going to be one thing or the other, but it felt more and more with Dred Scott and with Bleeding Kansas, that the trend was for it to be all slavery. And the real source of tension was that the South was trying to expand slavery in all directions. It was certainly trying to expand it west. There was a feeling throughout the South that the South had played an especially large role in winning the Mexican War. Therefore, they were entitled to a lot of that land, but they were also trying to shove slavery down the throats of Northerners.

EDWARD WIDMER:

And that feeling was growing. The slave owners wanted the right to travel with their slaves into Northern cities with no fear that their slave would be taken from them, or they might want to move into a Northern city for many years and have slaves with them with the law protecting their ownership of the slave. So basically they wanted slavery made permanent through legislation by Congress or constitutional amendments if necessary. But then it's forgotten the extent to which they were trying to expand slavery to the South. Southerners, especially when James Buchanan was president, which he was for four years and he was Secretary of State at one point and he was Ambassador to England also, he was very high up in the councils of the US government, they were trying really hard to acquire Cuba by purchase if possible, by force if necessary. That would have created a big slave state or maybe several.

EDWARD WIDMER:

Then they were also, they weren't satisfied with the enormous amount of land they got from Mexico. And they were looking at three Northern states that are still there. They're still a part of Mexico to the South of Texas. There was a lot of chatter about taking these three Mexican states. Mexico also has united states and the Southerners in the US government wanted to peel off three large Mexican states to add more senators because they were terrified that expansion was happening faster in the Northern and in the upper Midwest, in Lincoln's part of the country. And they were right. Expansion was happening faster because immigrants were coming in. Immigrants didn't want to go into the slave states. They wanted to build up free lives, work for themselves, bring their families, have good educations. None of that was possible in the slave South.

EDWARD WIDMER:

So Southerners were not stupid. They saw the writing on the wall and the only way they could keep up with a North that was growing incredibly fast, was to build artificial new slave states by seizing territory illegally.

Lincoln's position on slavery

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EDWARD WIDMER:

Well, he's been saying all around Illinois for a long time, including before the Lincoln-Douglas debates, but then especially in those debates, that slavery is immoral. He's out there saying it's bad for America. He doesn't have a plan for ending it, and that's why he's not technically an abolitionist. There are abolitionists mainly around Boston and upstate New York who are calling for an immediate end to slavery. And Lincoln doesn't do that. Lincoln is a

law-abiding citizen and reveres the U.S. Constitution and the Constitution protects slavery where it exists. But he is very fixed on these earlier promises to limit the spread of slavery. So he does not want it to go out into Kansas and Nebraska and beyond. And sure, he also knows that if you limit the spread, it will ultimately die. It might take 50 or 100 years, but all of these new Northern states will come into existence without slavery.

EDWARD WIDMER:

So the numbers will go up in the U.S. Senate, making it more likely that there will be anti-slavery measures in the Senate of 20, 30, 40 years in the future. The South knows that too, which is why they are aggressively trying to plant the seeds for new slavery states. But he's speaking also very powerfully about the role of the United States in the world and how if democracy is going to succeed, it needs to succeed without this curse on the house, that slavery is a kind of curse on the house of democracy. And Lincoln is really aware of the spread, or the failed spread is a better way of saying it, of democratic self-government in Europe at this time.

EDWARD WIDMER:

A lot of people have been trying to build something better for themselves. And in the German-speaking parts of Europe, it's not quite one country called Germany, in France there's a failed revolution in 1848. Germany, a failed revolution in 1848. In Italy, they're trying. In England, there's liberal movements of the people who are sick and tired of the landed classes telling them what to do, and they're all doing pretty badly. And Lincoln is quite aware that strongmen seem to have the upper hand, strongmen and kings, but there is a better way possible. And yet it won't ever happen if the US cannot put its own house in order.

Lincoln's views on the founding documents

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EDWARD WIDMER:

The Constitution bakes slavery into the federal system. It's in the DNA of America in a lot of ways, although it's very important to be precise about which founding documents found the country. There are a few competing claims. Constitution is mighty important, and Lincoln talks about it on many occasions, especially in his great address at the Cooper Union in February, 1860. There's also a Bill of Rights that comes right after the Constitution, which is a little better. The First Amendment especially is hinting that there are great freedoms inherent in citizenship at the same time that the Constitution is protecting the ownership of property, including it's said implicitly rather than explicitly, the ownership of human beings, or as the Constitution says, other persons. At the same time, it gives the South in this nauseating way, extra representation for the fact that other persons live in the South. But those other persons will never have any right to vote on their own.

EDWARD WIDMER:

So they're counted for the benefit of the very people who will never let them live their lives in freedom. But there are other documents. The one Lincoln loves the most is anterior to the Constitution. It comes 11 years earlier and it's better. It's the Declaration of Independence. It is the literal act of creation of the United States. As Lincoln says many times in the 1850s and then on his way to Washington beautifully when he goes into Independence Hall, it would already have been a great document merely if it said we are creating this new country. That was a pretty big thing to say, but it didn't stop there. It said we are creating a new country based on perpetual human rights that belong to all people, the rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. And those rights are inherently anti-slavery.

EDWARD WIDMER:

If you believe all people have the right to control their life and they have the right to liberty and they have the right to pursue happiness in their own ways, well, then they cannot be enslaved. It was a very powerful argument that Lincoln made I would say more effectively than the in your face abolitionists of that time, because he was saying look to our own rules and our own moral standards. This is what we said. We didn't say merely we would be independent. We said we would create a better kind of country than existed before. So you could not be a democracy based on human rights and have slavery all at the same time.

EDWARD WIDMER:

The genius of Abraham Lincoln is he has a lot of different voices. He has this sonorous, almost spiritual voice in which he talks to Americans about their "better angels." That's the phrase from the end of the first inaugural. That's the most beautiful Lincoln, that's the one we love the most, and you hear it again at Gettysburg. But he's also a really shrewd and factual evidence-based lawyer. And in the Cooper Union Address, which really won him the nomination, and then the presidency, he goes into this with a fine tooth comb looking at the Constitution the way you have to. There isn't that much beauty in the Constitution. It is a legal document, and so he attacks it on legal ground. He talks about the 39 people who signed it, very factual, not the framers or the founders, these sort of vague terms. It's the 39 people who signed the Constitution.

EDWARD WIDMER:

He talks about their agreements with each other and their occasional failure to agree on certain things and their general consensus on certain things. He argues forcefully that they were ashamed of slavery. They didn't use the word slavery or slave in the Constitution. Then as life went on, that life had existed

before the Constitution and after, and Congress was trying to legislate for a lot of new land that was originally territories.

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EDWARD WIDMER:

Ohio is a territory first before it becomes a state. In all of these legislative acts of Congress, they are really soft pedaling slavery and saying in the case of Ohio, it's not allowed, but even in more Southern places, they're acting with shame and saying it will not last for very long. And in their personal statements to each other they're saying the same thing. So he's really fighting back forcefully against the argument in 1860 coming out of the South that slavery, not only are we not ashamed of it, it is the way of the future for the entire United States.

Lincoln's road to the White House

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EDWARD WIDMER:

He'd actually lost almost everything he had ever run for since his not very distinguished term in Congress 12 years earlier in 1860. He was a very distant long shot as the year 1860 opens. There were some lists of possible Republican nominees in December, 1859, one with 19 people, one with 21. He didn't crack either of those lists, but he was in the right place politically. He was from the right part of the country. Everyone had a feeling a Westerner would be good as a Republican candidate. He'd said the right things. And as it turned out, he had all these special powers that were not clear to other Americans until he actually won and began to take the train into Washington and to speak in this magical way that nobody knew he could speak in.

EDWARD WIDMER:

If you were to say how well-known is he on January 1st, 1860, I would say he's not well-known at all. He's a regional politician of no great distinction. He's served one term in the House a long time ago, 12 years earlier. He was recalled because his service was so embarrassing to him and to the people who sent him there, mainly because he criticized the most popular war in American history to that point, the Mexican War. It's all fascinating. He criticized a president for starting a war that he said he didn't have a right to start, which was exactly the criticism that came to Abraham Lincoln after he became president. But he did it on a moral high ground, and that was important always to Lincoln. The moral high ground is important to who he is and he's stubborn.

EDWARD WIDMER:

That's a great part of the Lincoln stories is he's not always doing things for his political advancement, although sometimes he does. So he's recalled and he has one failure after another really in Springfield for 12 long years and runs against Douglas for the Senate in 1858, loses, but begins to make a name for himself for his principle dissent against Douglas and against the Kansas-Nebraska Act and against slavery generally. But even with all that progress, he's not that well-known in the East. A book is made of his speeches in the Lincoln-Douglas debates. It's printed in Columbus, Ohio, which is not a major center of publishing. So some New Yorkers know a little bit about Lincoln, but not that much. But then a key moment comes in late February when he's invited to give a speech in New York. The site of the speech moves around. It's supposed to be in a church in Brooklyn, but then it's moved across the river to Manhattan.

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EDWARD WIDMER:

And as everyone knows, Manhattan is the big time. So he comes and gives it at the Cooper Union, a building that's still there. It's great if you're a history lover to go into that building. And before a very cynical audience of sophisticated New Yorkers, he stands on the stage and there's a wonderful description of how un-New Yorkie he looked, this sort of hayseed coming off the prairie with his hair sticking up, his suit didn't fit him, and his body language was always bad at the beginning of a speech. One listener said he looked wild and wooly. And then he started speaking and with his impeccable research and just hammering one point home after another, he demonstrated to this cynical crowd of New Yorkers that slavery was absolutely not what the Founding Fathers, or more specifically, the 39 people who signed the Constitution, the rules under which we live as he said it, that slavery was something they were embarrassed about. And anyone who was opposed to it was absolutely within their rights as a citizen in 1860 and were more American than the people who are trying to prop up this heavy weight that rested on the backs of so many people. So he left that room after a speech that was probably only about 15, 20 minutes long, suddenly as a runaway media sensation. We all know how important that was. There was a very successful, widespread media headquartered in New York City.

EDWARD WIDMER:

And suddenly everybody was talking about Abraham Lincoln. The timing was perfect. Two months later, two and a half months later in May, the Republican Convention was in Chicago conveniently, and his managers had all of their people there. All these screaming Illinoisans, Illinoisans are called Suckers back then, and they made a big noise every time Lincoln's name was mentioned. On the third ballot he beat the presumptive front runner, William Seward who was much more famous at the beginning of 1860. So all the doors opened for him in exactly the right sequence.

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EDWARD WIDMER:

Everything was working for him in 1860. Things that had not worked for him previously suddenly were working. After he got the nomination, he became the most famous man in America. But he was not famous at all before getting the nomination, so pretty rapid change. But things that had not worked for him earlier, like his awkward appearance on a stage, when he didn't seem as sophisticated as other politicians, suddenly that was authentic and charming.

EDWARD WIDMER:

In a moment when Americans were really sick of all politicians, Lincoln coming from so far away and looking the way he did, his face just didn't look like the pasty faces of other Northerners who like the South were called dough faces. And Lincoln had a hard face of a man who'd worked with his hands throughout his life. And he had. And suddenly the railsplitter image, which was not his invention, but he rolled with it– that worked. That was a brilliant image that a printmaker in New York could make tens of thousands of images of a guy holding an ax. And that just got out there. People plastered that image on walls. They put it in magazines. The railsplitter was one of the most successful political images of the 19th Century. It just said a lot. It said people who work with their hands are better than these politicians boring us to death with their speeches that never go anywhere. There's also something a little potentially lethal about a guy holding an ax, you know? It showed he's going to come in and break things up in Washington. And that has worked for a lot of candidates in American history. I'm going to go drain the swamp or I'm going to break things. That was implicit, I think, in the railsplitter image.

Lincoln's upbringing

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EDWARD WIDMER:

Lincoln came out of a poverty that was as deep as any would-be president in our history. There are not many who come close. I think Andrew Jackson came close and there's an interesting respect from Lincoln for Jackson, although they were mostly from different political traditions. Lincoln's a Whig, Jackson was a Democrat. But Lincoln admired Jackson also and was reading Jackson's writing as he was preparing to become president. But not many other presidents were as poor. In recent history, Barack Obama and Bill Clinton came out of pretty straightened circumstances. But again, probably not as desperately poor as Lincoln was. And I found evidence in my research of a period in his childhood when his mother had died, pretty hard thing for a child to live through, and his father went off to find a new wife and was away for a number of weeks. And when his stepmother came back and found these two children had been living alone, she said Lincoln was almost nude from not having any clothes to wear and his stomach was a little bit leathery, almost distended the way you might find a child in an epidemic.

EDWARD WIDMER:

So he had endured some real suffering in his childhood. And that feeling of something dark inside of him, stayed with him, and it's one of the most attractive things about Lincoln. In this never ending sequence of upbeat politicians who talk too much, he was reticent. He didn't talk about himself a whole lot, which is unusual for politicians, and he just seemed conscious of some tragedy inside of him, maybe the death of his mother, maybe the death of others he had loved, including this mysterious young woman, Ann Rutledge, he loved in New Salem. There's a lot of uncertainty about that story, but also a fair amount of speculation that it really happened. But whatever it was, there was a sadness inside of him, and it did not hold back his connection to his audiences. People sense this deep thing inside of him and were attracted to it.

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EDWARD WIDMER:

And, again, it goes to the authentic quality, that here was a politician who wasn't trying to put anything over on them. He had lived through some hard things, as so many Americans had, and he was conscious of a great struggle to come without knowing it would be a war, or the Civil War. We didn't know that would be the name of it, but he seemed like the right man for the job because he was so sincere and looked you in the eye, and didn't use too many words, and didn't try to trick you in his oratory.

Lincoln's Republican nomination

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EDWARD WIDMER:

So Lincoln is nominated on the third ballot in a building called the Wigwam, a big kind of arena, full of screaming, crazy political people. Many of whom had been hired by his political allies. He was not there. You didn't go to the convention when you were a nominee in the 19th century. And so on the third ballot, to everyone's amazement, he pulls it off. He gets the nomination from William Seward, who much more famous – famous Senator from New York and other famous senators from Ohio and Missouri and other places. It's the news story of the year. Lincoln has the Republican nomination, and from that moment, he's the most hated man in the South, but not the most loved man in the North. There's still a lot of pockets of resentment. How did this guy win the prize over the guy we liked? Especially in New York. New York loves Seward and New Yorkers cannot believe that this obscure regional politician has outfoxed them.

EDWARD WIDMER:

And so they start pouring over the manuscripts, the record, the speech record, what does Lincoln believe? Who is he? And it's very hard to know. He's a kind of a cipher without that many well-known speeches and the great speeches to come do not exist yet, where Lincoln shows his remarkable powers to go into a different gear of speech writing than anyone else knew about in 1860. None of that has happened. He's a mildly interesting, folksy politician from the small state capital of Illinois, but all these doors have opened in just the right way and his unusual body size and his gravitas and his face and his unkempt hair all look interesting in the graphic imagery that starts flooding American newspapers. Newspapers, especially the weekly newspapers, are developing a graphic capability that they've never had. So you can look at this man's face and feel like he's looking back at you.

EDWARD WIDMER:

The kind of sadness inherent in that face is compelling to people at a time of rampant political lying, obfuscation, failure to legislate, broken-down politics in Washington. This guy coming from the great prairies of the West seems like a hopeful new figure in the soap opera of American politics. Another thing he does very well is he has incredible message discipline. He holds his tongue really well. He doesn't give any speeches throughout the campaign. It's amazing to reflect on the fact that our greatest orator in American history said nothing when he was running for president. Now you have to speak almost 24/7, until you're exhausted and your listeners are even more exhausted. And he just sat in his house in Springfield or walked a short distance to a makeshift office in the old state capitol, Springfield, and told folksy stories to his friends and went home.

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EDWARD WIDMER:

And that was about all he did, but that was just the right amount, too, of being seen, but not saying too much. The only time he said anything, he went to a kind of state fair in Springfield and was surprised by a crowd that asked him to say something. And all he said was, “You've embarrassed me. I don't want to say anything. That is the end of my speech.” That was the only recorded speech by Lincoln during the campaign of 1860.

EDWARD WIDMER:

But then, again, the doors open. The Democratic party, which has always been the more powerful party for 30 years. They've won just about every election. On the rare occasions a Whig won, he usually died after a year or two. So Democrats have controlled everything and the Democrats are controlled by the South. So they are going to run against Lincoln, but they split in half. So that's a miracle that helps Lincoln.

EDWARD WIDMER:

The debate over slavery is so acrimonious in 1860, that all politics is breaking down everywhere. There is no civil dialogue in the Senate or on the floor of the House. The Supreme Court has become dysfunctional. The media is not having its best hour in American politics. It's just slipshod attacks, fact-free often. Everything is bad in Washington, and the great Democratic Party breaks in half.

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EDWARD WIDMER:

And Stephen Douglas runs as the Northern nominee. John Breckenridge, who's the vice president of the United States, runs as the Southern nominee. And even though there are plenty of reasons to criticize Stephen Douglas for cooperating with the ‘Slave Power’ of the South to further his own political ambitions, in some important ways, he also put the brakes on the slave power

and said, there are ways in which I will not go any further with you. I think it should be recognized that Stephen Douglas helped Lincoln at some crucial moments, including helping the Democratic party split in half, into a Northern and Southern half. That really helped Lincoln, and then Douglas helped Lincoln after Lincoln won.

Southern views of Lincoln after the nomination

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EDWARD WIDMER:

The second he gets the nomination, he has a kind of target on his back, both figuratively and literally as it turned out. He's attacked by all of the leading secessionists, and these guys are very shrewd political thinkers. They know which way the winds are blowing. In addition to it being a year of a presidential election, it's also a census year. The census is being taken in 1860, and these guys are so smart that they know the census is going to record enormous population growth in the North and feeble growth, if not loss in some parts of the South. And so what does that mean? They're going to lose representation in Congress, not so much in the Senate, but definitely in the house of representatives. So they've got one foot out the door, even before the election of November 6 and they start attacking Lincoln as a kind of tyrant or a stooge of the abolitionists, who's going to end slavery overnight, or maybe he is part slave.

EDWARD WIDMER:

Lincoln is so poor, it's not even known who his grandparents are. And so there's speculation that everything from a rich white slave owner to maybe there's some African blood inside of Lincoln, his running mate, Hannibal Hamlin of Maine, does have a somewhat dark complexion. So he's obviously half African-American or entirely African-American as the South started

writing in its insanity and anger. Then a lot of this writing becomes violent both before the election on November 6, and then it accelerates after Lincoln wins. In respectable Southern newspapers, things are said, or elected officers to the U.S. Congress start talking about their hope that Lincoln will be assassinated before he can ever become president or that some accident might befall him on his route or that a citizen might just take matters into... All this coded language about violence against Lincoln begins to permeate the Southern press.

EDWARD WIDMER:

It's disgusting and anti democratic, but there are no checks on the South at this moment, and it should be said, there are a lot of brave Southerners who love the United States of America. They were always there. They were there throughout the Civil War, some volunteered to defend the United States of America against the rebellion. They loved the U.S. more than their home states. We know the Robert E. Lee story of signing up for your state over the country. A lot of Southerners did the opposite.

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EDWARD WIDMER:

Winfield Scott, the great commanding officer of the United States military, is from Virginia. He does a great deal to protect Washington from pro-Southerners who are trying to come into Washington after Lincoln is elected with militias and take over the U.S. Capitol. And Winfield Scott, who was a Southerner, is too smart for them. He sets up cannons around Washington and they can't take it. But in my research, I found out it was a pretty close call with Southerners, walking around, wanting to take D.C. for the capital of a country they might have called the United States of America. It just would have been a slavery based United States, as opposed to what happened, that the United States became synonymous with Lincoln and a war

effort to eliminate slavery. But all of these ideas were very much up in the air in this fluid media moment of 1860.

The 1860 election

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EDWARD WIDMER:

So Lincoln has mostly been in his home, which you can still visit. It's a wonderful home. It's a home that also conveys to you how far from a log cabin he actually had come. So when he's the rail candidate, the log cabin image is really important to get out there. It makes him look relatable and poor, but he's actually living in a very nice, middle-class comfortable home in Springfield with a lot of nice sofas and prints on the walls. So he's there for most of the day. But then in the evening, he goes into a telegraph office on the town square of Springfield, which again, you can still go. Springfield is a wonderful place to visit to go back into Lincoln's world. And the Lincoln Presidential Library's a great place to visit. I would also recommend the old state house, which to him was the state house and that's a moving historical experience. But he goes into this telegraph office facing the main square of Springfield and late in the evening, the results begin to tap in, in the phrase of the day.

EDWARD WIDMER:

So the telegraph, pretty modern system. I mean, it's not a cell phone, but it's pretty fast. Just seconds from New York City, Philadelphia, maybe more than a few seconds, but not too many. Springfield's using electricity along telegraph wires. It's not so far from what the telephone will be, and it's a kind of communications miracle. Late in the evening, the results tap in from Pennsylvania and New York, And both of those states were up for grabs. And it's a broken election. There are four people running and New York is in play.

Stephen Douglas and his Northern Democrats might take New York, and Pennsylvania is a well-known cesspool of politics that can go – whoever is bribing the most people, what faction of Pennsylvania politics is strongest at that moment. All of that is in play, but there is an overwhelming turnout of more than 80% of the American people.

EDWARD WIDMER:

That always has been the healthiest restorative of our democracy, even with political bosses and money, when the people turn out like that, it is a great democratic moment and it was in 1860. So the people turned out and they voted more for him than anyone else. It was still less than 40%. He got 39.8%, to be very specific, but he got Pennsylvania, he got New York. He really swept almost the entire North except a piece of New Jersey, and we all know what happens in New Jersey, stays in New Jersey. So he really won the North, and with the electoral college, liberals now love to criticize the electoral college, but it actually favored Abraham Lincoln, who you might say was kind of on the left of his time. He won the electoral college decisively. So by midnight of November 6, he knows he's the winner. He walks the short distance home happy, but also reality was beginning to set in like "what have I signed up for?"

Southern reaction to Lincoln's election

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EDWARD WIDMER:

The South reacts nearly as quickly as the North. They too have telegraphs. Their system is not quite as comprehensive, but they exist, and they know immediately, and really they have known before the day of the vote. They already know that they have split the Democratic party, which was their best hope. And then another Southerner is running. John Bell is running on a

fourth party called the Constitutional Union Party, which peels off the Northern South, Virginia, and Kentucky, Tennessee. So they have botched it. They're so divided, they can't even figure themselves out in 1860. That's how bitter politics are. So they really know already that Lincoln is going to win the North, unless by a miracle, Stephen Douglas pulls it out of his hat, but he can't.

EDWARD WIDMER:

So already they are organizing. So the news comes through the South and there is rage and demonstrations, and interestingly, I found some evidence of militias in South Carolina forming under what is still called the Gadston flag, which is the 'Don't Tread On Me' flag that we still see all the time at biker rallies or just angry rallies, anti-government rallies. “Don't tread on me” is a powerful message. It united Northerners and Southerners in the American revolution. But then it was becoming really a pro-Southern and ant-Lincoln message in 1860. It retains a fair amount of that symbolism today.

EDWARD WIDMER:

So they are well-organized in the South and the people behind secession, people like Jefferson Davis and his friends in the Senate, are not slouches. They know how to game the system and they begin to write letters to each other and have secret councils here and there in the South or in Washington. A lot of the leading secessionists are sitting senators in Washington D.C., and they actually feel that they are in a kind of citadel of power for them.

EDWARD WIDMER:

So the federal government really belongs to the pro-slavery South and not to the North. So Lincoln's election marks a real game changer that for almost the first time in American history, Northerners will have real control over the U.S. government. They've been marginalized from day one. They've had a couple presidents here and there, but no one has ever won a second term. They've

never controlled the Supreme Court or Congress. And now with Lincoln's election and the promise of demographic change riding on the census, the North is going to have more power than it ever has. So these Southerners are hangers on, on a fortress that is beginning to lose its defendability. They still control it. And they control the president of the United States, James Buchanan, who may be from Pennsylvania, a Northern state, but he is in the pocket of the South. So they are strategizing in Washington. How can we still hold onto power? And all kinds of schemes are on the table. There's a long time between November and March when Lincoln will become president, if he can even make it to Washington.

EDWARD WIDMER:

There were a lot of parliamentary maneuvers that these very smart Southerners know how to deploy. You can throw a presidential election into Congress. You can say the results were inconclusive, which in all honesty, they were somewhat inconclusive. Lincoln got less than 40% of the vote. That has actually happened already in American history in 1824 when Andrew Jackson won a lot of popular votes, but it was an unclear national mandate. So Congress took over and it awarded the presidency to John Quincy Adams in what was later called by angry supporters of Jackson, the Corrupt Bargain. But 1824 is not that many years in the past in 1860. So there's a real fear that Congress might take over.

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EDWARD WIDMER:

The South is threatened by Lincoln's election because it shows that they have lost control of the thing they value the most, which is control of the United States of America. They have gamed the system from day one. They've controlled the presidency, the legislative branch and the judicial branch, the whole ball of wax. And Alexander Stephens, who becomes the vice president

of the Confederacy, is a fascinating figure, and an old friend of Lincoln's. They're writing to each other, by the way, during the transition. It's really interesting. But Stephens says to some would-be seceders in Georgia, where he's from, are you out of your minds? We've always controlled the U.S. government. We'll get it back. Why would we secede? That's worse. Why don't we just do what we've always done and use our parliamentary genius to control everything. And it's a really interesting admission of what they had always played at.

EDWARD WIDMER:

I think there was actually considerable doubt about the future of slavery, because, on both sides, there were shades of opinion. In the North, you do have a rising number of abolitionists who just say, this has to end, it's deeply immoral and we need to now take it into Congress and end it. But you have people like Lincoln saying, we don't want to expand it, but we recognize that it is protected where it already exists and has always existed through a history that precedes the creation of the United States, and goes back into the much deeper history of Europe and Africa and the founding of settlements in North America. So Lincoln is not going to end it where it exists, although Southerners who are paranoid begin to fear that he will, but also in the South, there are shades of opinion. There are the crazy extremists who are trying to invade Cuba and Mexico and resemble in a lot of ways foreign policy extremists of the middle of the 20th century, who were trying to take over Central America or fight a cold war that included sacrificing some American ideals in order to gain more territory. But there are a lot of decent law abiding Southerners who don't want any part of that immoral future, but they also are uncomfortable with slavery ending too quickly because of the social disruption that will follow. So you have a lot of uncertainty where it's going after Lincoln is elected.

The secession movement

00:47:31:00

EDWARD WIDMER:

In the South the energy is with the angry people, not the moderates. In the North, it's harder to say, but Lincoln is a moderate, and so I think you could say the energy is more with the moderates, but the angry Southerners pull the whole South with them. They take over state secession conventions beginning in Charleston, South Carolina, in December of 1860. So only a month and a half after Lincoln is elected, South Carolina has made good on its threat. There've been a lot of threats to secede throughout American history, including a couple from the North. No one has actually ever done it. And then suddenly in December, South Carolina does it, and then all the other deep Southern states follow suit. So Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, Florida, Texas, all follow suit. And suddenly you're looking at a pretty ugly map if you're Abraham Lincoln trying to come into Washington to become president of the so-called United States. Half the country's a different color all of a sudden. We talk about red and blue America now. This is like, it really has become another country. So Lincoln has to come in and maintain a fiction, which he maintains throughout his presidency, that what you see in front of you has not happened, that the South has not seceded – the Union is perpetual, it's just a temporary show. It's like a bad TV show, you can turn the channel back to the show you like better, and that's what he maintains throughout his presidency.

EDWARD WIDMER:

But then, the fulcrum of everything becomes this little piece of federal land that happens to be in the harbor of the hottest place in America and the reddest place in America, Charleston, South Carolina, happens to be guarded by actually two federal forts, Fort Moultrie and Fort Sumter. The defense of

Fort Sumter by U.S. soldiers in Charleston Harbor becomes, for Northerners, a meaningful place to say, "We won't take it any longer, these are good federal soldiers. They come from our whole country, they're just doing what we asked them to do, they're in a fort. They're not invading anybody, and we need to keep sending ships to bring them food, so they won't starve."

00:50:24:00

EDWARD WIDMER:

The rabid Southerners start saying, "This is an intolerable affront to our sovereignty as a Southern Nation." At the very beginning, South Carolina thinks it's actually a country unto itself called the Palmetto Republic. The Palmetto is the tree on the flag of South Carolina, and they're saying, "What are you doing on our land?" And the North saying, "What are you talking about? We've always had a fort here and we paid for it, and we built it and we're not giving it to you." So, that becomes the pressure point. Finally, in the act of supplying that fort with a ship, the South says, this is intolerable and they open cannon fire on Fort Sumter.

EDWARD WIDMER:

And that's the beginning of the Civil War, as most of us understand it. That was already a brilliant tactical victory for Abraham Lincoln, because he had forced the other side through patience and weathering a lot of criticism that he was dithering, into making the first move and a pretty violent move it was. It was shooting cannons at good American soldiers. But for the rest of the war, Lincoln occupied the moral high ground, and in any conflict in a military conflict, you want the high ground. But you also want the moral high ground and Lincoln had it from that moment on.

Lincoln in the months before taking office

00:51:54:00

EDWARD WIDMER:

So the crisis has only gotten worse since he was elected, he's imprisoned in his hometown. He can't really leave because presidents didn't do that then. He's got four long months to kill, as the crisis keeps getting worse. The secessionists are very active. They're building their new country, they're holding secession conventions. They're talking to each other, so a new very dangerous country is coming into existence, that will be called the Confederate States of America. Meanwhile, the actual president is inert and people are worried, there's something seriously wrong with James Buchanan. He seems to not have any ability to finish a thought or a sentence and nothing is happening. And so Lincoln is trapped and he's saying things like, let the barn door open and all the horses are running out. There's almost no US government at all in Washington.

EDWARD WIDMER:

So there was a famous line about democracy in the era of Jefferson. It's, "The best government is that government that governs least." And that has become terrifyingly true in the winter of 1860, that nobody's running anything. So Lincoln's got to get there and repair a lot of the damage of a government that has gone AWOL, in effect. And he's also organizing a very new political party, the Republican Party, that has never actually had power. So it's trying to be a national power, but it isn't really one, it's run by state leaders from state to state. They don't all like each other, the Pennsylvanians don't like the New Yorkers. The people in Maine are very far away. There are immigrants involved, who are quite different than the old line Americans and so Lincoln is a figurehead of a very new political party and that's giving him political headaches.

EDWARD WIDMER:

He's trying to pick the people who will be in his cabinet. That's giving him major headaches because he's got to thank Pennsylvania for helping him to win. There are two leaders of Pennsylvania who hate each other, and he's got to pick one. The second he picks one, he's going to alienate half of Pennsylvania. But then maybe the biggest challenge of all, is he's got to actually make it to Washington D.C. He's very far away in Springfield, Illinois. And that's a paradox that no founder had ever figured out, that as the country keeps moving to the West, that's going to be a backbreaker of a trip to get a president in from those places into Washington, especially if half the country hates him.

00:54:38:00

EDWARD WIDMER:

So he's got a plan, an actual train trip through a very divided country, divided within each state, divided within the North. But then the South is even more lethal for him and in fact, there's a short version of this trip he might have taken through Kentucky and Virginia. He decided it was too dangerous. He could not go through his native state of Kentucky to Washington. So he had to go on this side winding trip of 1900 miles and live through it. And as the trip began and continued, living through each day became a serious challenge for Abraham Lincoln.

The inaugural train

00:55:26:00

EDWARD WIDMER:

The threat was never far away. As he knew before the trip started, he was getting hate mail. Anyone can write a letter to Abraham Lincoln, he got unsigned letters, drawings of Lincoln with a noose around his neck that, one

day his wife accidentally opened and was very upset. And then some people signed their hate mail to Lincoln. Very angry, very obscene letters are coming through the U.S. mail to his home in Springfield. But he's also picking up intelligence from his friends or in office, that this could be dangerous. There was a belief in the west where he came from, that the two westerners, who had been elected president since Andrew Jackson – William Henry Harrison and Zachary Taylor – both died under suspicious circumstances, not too long after getting to Washington, and they felt that it was like ancient Rome. That Washington was an evil place with evil people with evil poisons that you literally should have a taster, tasting your food and drinking your drink, or you will be killed by the horrible people of Washington D.C. And so people are writing him, “Don't, don't drink anything, bring a taster with you.: So they're aware of how dangerous it will be.

EDWARD WIDMER:

But yeah, from the moment the trip starts, there are little accidents that are suspicious on the first day, even in Illinois, pretty safe place to be Abraham Lincoln. The land of Lincoln, now. An object is found on the track when he got near the border with Indiana, might've thrown his train. Was that an assassination attempt? We don't know with certainty, but it was a suspicious object on the track.

EDWARD WIDMER:

In Cincinnati, Ohio, a kind of a Northern city, although it's on the Ohio river, which is a pretty Southern place to be Northern. And I argue in my book, there are a lot of Southern parts of the North. In Cincinnati, an explosive device was found in a bag, in the car that Lincoln was about to come into, as reported by a newspaper immediately, afterwards. We had to take all of these reports with a grain of salt. We don't have a hundred percent certainty, but still a newspaper reported on an explosive device, left in Lincoln's personal car, in the middle of this train trip to Washington.

EDWARD WIDMER:

He didn't want to maximize the danger. He had a lot of personal courage, but also he wanted to restore confidence, in the presidency and in him. At a moment when it was at a low ebb and he just wasn't a person inclined to statements of drama to enhance his political standing. He wanted to tamp things down, but my reading of the newspapers, which you can do actually even better now than you could then, has shown that there was a real feeling of danger to Lincoln throughout this 13 day trip.

EDWARD WIDMER:

Survival is goal one. It's important for the Lincoln administration to come, that Lincoln be alive upon arrival, in Washington. And as it turned out that that took some doing, but all of these other goals and very significant benefits become clear. As soon as the trip is underway.

00:59:00:00

EDWARD WIDMER:

Lincoln is a well-organized thinker and planner of his own life and he has anticipated about one big speech a day on the journey, and he has written them out longhand before the trip starts. But as soon as the train pulls out of Springfield, following an extraordinary short statement of farewell from Lincoln to his fellow citizens. An incredible rewriting of political oratory, as it was understood at that moment – a much more personal statement than any president had ever said, up to that moment. As soon as the train is moving, they realize every few miles, Americans are coming out from all of the cracks, from farms adjacent to the train line from small towns. And increasingly, as they get into the cities, huge numbers of people are coming out to look Lincoln in the face and hear from him. What are your plans? Where is this country going? How are we going to get out of this crisis?

EDWARD WIDMER:

And Lincoln can't hide and it's not in his nature to hide. So he just stands out there on the back platform and talks to them. And it's the beginning of what will be known throughout the next 150 years, as a kind of whistle stop campaign. That usually means someone like Harry Truman, who's running for the presidency and speaking. Lincoln has actually already won, but in effect he's inventing the whistle-stop campaign after winning and he needs to campaign because he needs to build up his support. A lot of Northerners have not voted for Lincoln. So he needs to establish for the first time a connection to the American people.

EDWARD WIDMER:

And as he improvises and uses all of the tricks – tricks sounds sort of sarcastic – but all of the, the ways of speaking that he has cultivated throughout a long career of being a lawyer, being a guy who talks to his fellow Americans over fences, in little taverns and small towns. He just goes out and talks and he tells little jokes and he helps people to get to know him and he talks about what he expects to do. He gives some clunky speeches that fall a little flat. He tries some jokes that really fall flat. He shows some areas in which he needs a little bit of grooming, still, is not a very good economic speech speaker and that's important to a president.

EDWARD WIDMER:

But over the course of the 13 days, he develops this extraordinary ability to speak beautifully about the creation of the United States of America and what is best about our country and where it is going and how he intends to keep what is best first and foremost in his thinking. And the last day of the trip is the apogee of his oratory to that point and it's some of the greatest speeches that have been given, in American history to that point.

Assassination plots

01:02:23:00

EDWARD WIDMER:

So, there were a lot of small plots that seem to have been planned against Lincoln, probably without too much planning. Little problems along the train track, but there was a serious conspiracy centered around Baltimore, Maryland, which was a city, you could call it Northern in some ways but Southern in more ways. It was a slave holding city and state, Maryland, and proud of being the biggest city in the South– it called itself that. It's also North of the capital of the United States of America. So geography gets a little muddled in all of this and it was a city full of people who hated Abraham Lincoln. And like so many Southerners were really angry that he had snuck in and won the presidency of a country that they felt they were entitled to control. And so a significant cabal of plotters is very active in Baltimore and in Washington over the winter of 1860 to 1861, but more active in Baltimore because it's a kind of perfect place to trap a president elect, changing trains between two train stations. A lot of American cities at that time had multiple train stations in a city because trains were understood to bring in sort of toxic air and you wanted to keep your downtown clean and merchants liked to have an enforced area for people to walk down between their trains so they could make a little bit of money. And Baltimore was like that.

EDWARD WIDMER:

There were three stations and Lincoln would have to get off one train and go on to the second train and in that passage he'd be in a, probably in a horse and carriage, and would be moving slowly and exposed. And by the way, he exposed – he stood out in public all the time to wave and bow to the crowds and to speak. So he was a kind of sitting duck and Baltimoreans love to shoot at sitting ducks. Duck hunting is a well-known sport in Chesapeake Bay. So in

fact, there was a kind of culture of gambling on Lincoln's odds and you can find in some of the sources, how the odds were changing for Lincoln's making it to Washington throughout his train trip. And they were getting worse.

EDWARD WIDMER:

The closer he got to Baltimore, the worse the outlook looked, and a lot of money was changing hands in Baltimore barrooms over what, who is going to kill Lincoln? When's it going to happen? It was like online betting for the NFL. And fortunately this plot was discovered by some pretty vigilant detective work. There were Northerners who were friends with Southerners, some pretty amazing people, including a woman named Dorothea Dix, who picked up on some descriptions of the plot to be in her own travels to the South. And then the head of a railroad in Philadelphia named Samuel Felton, not a famous name of that time, but he was an honest railroad executive said, well, they are threatening my line. I need to protect him, he's a passenger on my train line. I'm going to hire a railroad detective. And he sent for the best one, he knew of, an immigrant living in Chicago, named Allan Pinkerton. Who came to meet him and said, I agree, this is a very dangerous situation, I'm your man, I accept the job, and he went back and he brought eight agents with him, including an extraordinarily brave woman.

01:06:27:00

EDWARD WIDMER:

And I'm so happy that this story, which it's the public part of the Civil War, the politicians and the soldiers – it's a pretty male preserve – but even before Lincoln can get to Washington, his life is saved by a group of people but especially by this very brave young woman named Kate Warne, I believe that's how we pronounce her name. There's an E at the end. She was a widow in her late twenties, living in Chicago.

EDWARD WIDMER:

And Allan Pinkerton later described her as a spy of extraordinary ability. She could imitate accents. So the moment she gets to Baltimore she imitated a woman from Alabama. Just interested in what's going on. What can you tell me what's happening in Baltimore this week? And within days had discovered every detail of the assassination plot and could just make small talk with people, get them to open up, tell her everything on their minds. And Allan Pinkerton had so much confidence in her that when he had all the details of the plot, he sent her to intercept Lincoln's train with its entourage and warn them: you cannot come through Baltimore and speak out in the open, or you will be killed.

EDWARD WIDMER:

And so she was the one who intercepted the presidential entourage and met with Lincoln's handlers, if that's the right word to use. And then ultimately with Lincoln and rode with him on that last night on an ordinary nighttime commuter train, from Philadelphia through Baltimore, into Washington, Kate Warne was there up to Baltimore. Then she got off after the most dangerous part of the route had happened, but she rode next to the person– she was protecting Abraham Lincoln. It's just a great story.

EDWARD WIDMER:

She didn't sleep that night and she didn't sleep much the night– I think she went about 48 hours without any sleep at all. Because the night before she went all night to warn Lincoln, for three nights in a row not just two, three nights, she was traveling all night, warning him and making everything ready.

Lincoln's arrival in Washington, D.C.

01:08:49:00

EDWARD WIDMER:

He's in partial disguise: he wore a different hat than he usually wore and he wore a different jacket. His face was still exposed. A false rumor was circulated after this successful nighttime– it's kind of an escape, except it was in his own country. A rumor was circulated that he wore a Scottish outfit, a kilt and a tam o'shanter. It was not true, but that rumor circulated. But he did wear a kind of close fitting hat, not the kind of stovepipe hat he's famous for and a different jacket, kind of like a sailor's pea jacket that isn't what we think of for Lincoln. And wearing those clothes he went all night from Philadelphia in an ordinary train, and he stepped off the train at about six in the morning in Washington where he was met by an old friend from Illinois, Elihu Washburne, a Congressman there.

EDWARD WIDMER:

There were some reports that William Seward was there also, but there are other reports that Seward overslept and met him a little later when he got to the hotel, he needed to check into the Willard hotel. And he did that shortly after his arrival and Allan Pinkerton, who was with him, sent a message to all the people who were a part of this secret network of spies, protecting Lincoln, that included railroad personnel and the detective agency of Allan Pinkerton. And he used the word that is the worst presidential code name in our history: He said, "nuts has been delivered safely to Washington," or specifically "to barley" was his nickname for Washington. So "nuts has been delivered to barley" and that was the code word for Lincoln is okay.

EDWARD WIDMER:

I mean, He had enemies everywhere and they vented their anger, basically that he had eluded their net, they were mad at his success. So in the South he's denounced for his cowardice, for putting on a disguise. It was sometimes described as wearing women's clothes. And Lincoln is alternately described as a tyrant who will destroy the United States of America and loves power. Or is this weak vacillating imbecile who puts on women's clothes, who is easily

controlled by others. There's no consistency. They just hate Lincoln. But yes, his successful arrival fed into their paranoid delusions about this stranger who was coming to town, who was going to change everything. But even in the North there are lot of Democratic papers who hate Lincoln and so he was ridiculed. He was even ridiculed in a paper that was supposed to be very pro Lincoln. *The New York Times* was from the same part of the Republican Party that he was from and that's where the rumor started that he was wearing Scottish clothing. So he really couldn't get a break for a long time.

01:12:12:00

EDWARD WIDMER:

And even after arriving in Washington, Washington wasn't so safe for him either. It's a more pro-Southern city than a pro-Northern city, but he made it and he got into his room in the Willard Hotel. And he surprised James Buchanan. He went over to the White House with William Seward and interrupted a cabinet meeting and you can imagine the surprise that Lincoln was showing up, a couple of days earlier than they expected him. And I'm sure it was a cabinet meeting in which they were divided over where- the do-nothing U.S. government of the winter of 1860 to 61– suddenly the personification of the new walks in. And that is the beauty of our system. When things are going badly, we elect new presidents-elect. And so in that moment, Lincoln's personified change coming. And a lot of Northerners took heart from his survival.

EDWARD WIDMER:

And I believe he also weakened the extremists because they had been boasting all over town, all over Washington– I wouldn't bet literally, I would not bet on his safe arrival, because they're all gambling in the bars and restaurants where alcohol flows freely and slaves bring your drinks and that they were very comfortable in that culture – I wouldn't bet on him coming

here. And then he walks in and checks a room at the biggest hotel in town. And it's kind of like Jimmy Stewart or John Wayne walking into a corrupt little town in a Western. And he's just like, "Do your worst, I'm here. And I represent democracy."

Lincoln's first inaugural address

01:14:10:00

EDWARD WIDMER:

The day of the inauguration is a very tense day, March 4th, 1861. Everyone's been waiting since November 6th. It's a long time. It's a flaw in our system that you have to wait that long after winning the election and the country has barely survived. You could argue it has not survived because there's this other country already in existence. The Confederate States of America and Lincoln has to get out there on the steps of the East Front of the Capitol, where once again, he's very exposed. He's speaking to the people, but he's also making himself vulnerable to anyone with a gun who might want to take a shot at him. And there are rumors up to March 4th, 1861, that there will be a last gasp attempt to take his life. Those rumors are circulating privately. And even in newspapers. The South is mad that he has survived the Baltimore plot. And so, but they've plenty of resources. They have plenty of people living in Washington.

EDWARD WIDMER:

But Lincoln characteristically goes out and he does his job the way he always does. So the carriage comes up to the Willard Hotel with Buchanan in it, and they say, "We have a choice, we can close the top or open it." And Lincoln says, "Absolutely let's open it, let's ride so the people can see us." And they get to the East Front, which is the opposite front that presidents now are inaugurated on. It's the side that faces what is now the Supreme Court.

EDWARD WIDMER:

So it's a fraught situation, if you're the military commander of Washington, D.C, which is Winfield Scott, this brave Southerner who has stood up to give Lincoln a fighting chance to make it to the Capitol of the United States in this very Southern location, where life is pretty dangerous for Abraham Lincoln. And to give him the time and the safety to deliver a speech without anyone pulling out a gun and shooting him. And so Scott has stationed sharpshooters, federal sharpshooters, on the rooftops of the tall buildings that surround the East Front of the Capitol.

EDWARD WIDMER:

There are soldiers mixing in with the crowd stand, undercover and in uniform, and there are cannons out. So the place is pretty well guarded, but even so no one has total control over the situation. And four years later during Lincoln's second inaugural, John Wilkes Booth stood extremely close to Lincoln as he gave the second inaugural speech. And later bragged to a friend who he could have easily killed Lincoln at that moment, if he wanted to. And that was as true four years earlier.

EDWARD WIDMER:

So Lincoln goes out there bravely and gives a remarkable speech. And it's the beginning of the display of his extraordinary powers of oratory that are deeper than those of any president in our history to that point. And really, it must be said, it's the beginning of this series of public statements going through his presidency through the second inaugural that represent the gold standard of presidential speaking for all time. I don't see any American president ever topping that. Many have tried and many have done very well, but still there's something special about the way Lincoln speaks to America.

01:17:56:00

EDWARD WIDMER:

And so he gives a really interesting speech. He's been working very hard under it, under the cloak of great secrecy. And there's a moment on the train trip where his son briefly lost the speech. He put it in a bag in a hotel baggage room, and it was a near disaster because if a rough draft of that speech had leaked to the press, it just would have shown Lincoln as disorganized and not capable of leading a nation– if he can't even keep his speech in a bag without anyone finding it. So the speech itself has had a kind of life of its own and he begins to write it in Springfield. He sets it in type. He continues to change certain words to fine tune it, to walk it back in some ways. He calms down a few verbs that will be easier for the South to take.

EDWARD WIDMER:

But the most meaningful change comes in the final weeks. After he arrives in Washington, there's still some time between February 23rd and March 4th. And he spends time with William Henry Seward and they do a remarkable kind of collaboration. Lincoln is not known for his collaboration. He's a pretty confident writer and speaker as it turned out. But with Seward who becomes his most meaningful partner in the new Lincoln administration, he's Secretary of State, he allows a real partnership and Seward sends in I believe 49 suggestions of changes and Lincoln accepts 27.

EDWARD WIDMER:

That's a lot, that's more than half. So 27 changes come into that speech from Seward, not from Lincoln and Seward has the best idea of all which is your ending isn't good enough. We all care about endings, documentaries, movies, whatever. And Lincoln has ended in a kind of legalistic way. And it is a legalistic speech in some ways, in which he mostly promises not to touch slavery in the South. If the South will stay in the U.S. he will let their domestic institutions, meaning slavery, stay untouched by the federal government. But

Seward says, "You need a more beautiful ending than that." And that is the beginning of this incredible final paragraph that begins. "I am loath to close," and it's a beautiful sentence unto itself because it just says, hold up, a little bit more coming, which isn't the way presidents talk. Usually it's all business. And Lincoln says, "I am loath to close." And then he talks about how we are not enemies, but friends, and then almost repeats it. And again, you don't usually repeat a sentence in a big presidential speech, but he says, "We must not be enemies." It's a simple, emphatic, beautiful line.

01:21:21:00

EDWARD WIDMER:

And then he goes into the even more beautiful sentences to come about the mystic chords of memory, which is actually a musical image. A chord is a kind of music. And one thing Americans liked in the 19th century, they would set these devices on their window sills called aeolian harps that when the wind blew through them, it was like wind chimes– you'd hear a nice music. And Lincoln is sort of saying our shared history as a single people is a kind of music that we can still hear all of us. And it floats across the entire country and into our hearts and hearthstones, the hearthstone is like the chimney you sit around. And when we calm down, all of us can still hear that music when the noise of all the anger that we're hearing, there's a better sound, which is the noise that we will hear when we listen to our better angels, which is this beautiful phrase that we still hear all the time. And so Lincoln had taken it up a notch and appealed to the South on emotional grounds, as well as political ground saying, "We are still a single people," and he never deviated from that argument throughout his presidency.

EDWARD WIDMER:

It's a very conciliatory speech, which actually can be hard for us to read today for its failure to condemn slavery as much as we would like him to be doing at

that moment. But his goal was to preserve the Union and avoid war. To restore normal relations among the States and above all to avoid bloodshed.

01:23:14:00

EDWARD WIDMER:

He was not willing to go to war over slavery at the beginning of the Civil War. And he says it very clearly in that first inaugural address, "Slavery will not be the cause of a rupture between us. You may preserve your domestic institutions without fear of interference from my administration." Later in the Civil War, a whole lot of history happened very fast. And as skirmish turned into total war, the ground shifted and Lincoln began to realize this is actually a war to end something that has always threatened the sanctity of our ideals as a people. And so beginning with the emancipation proclamation and then with the Gettysburg Address afterwards, and then even more explicitly with the great second inaugural, he says, "you know what, slavery was the cause of the Civil War. We didn't always say it the right way." He says that in the second inaugural. But all knew that slavery was the cause. So he corrects himself in the second inaugural and says actually slavery was the cause. And it's a great luxury of historians, including me, to go back and rewrite something you're a little embarrassed about later on.

The Gettysburg Address

01:24:29:00

EDWARD WIDMER:

It's hard to pick a single moment of the Gettysburg Address as being the most beautiful because it's only 272 words long. It's like a throat clearing. I'll be past that in this answer, it's all great beginning with the unusual beginning "four score," who talks that way? That's like– there's some evidence that's the

Old Testament– there's the life of a man is three score and 10. There's some places in Shakespeare that might come from. And Lincoln loved the *King James Bible* and Shakespeare.

EDWARD WIDMER:

It's surprisingly a speech without any news announcement of any kind. There's no "I therefore declare that I'm calling up 100,000 new troops to chase Robert Lee, who dared to come into Pennsylvania. We're going to wrap this war up." It's not like that at all.

EDWARD WIDMER:

It's like a sermon. It's like a religious meditation on the meaning of America. And there's some *Old Testament* in there, but there's some *New Testament* too. And the key phrase, I think it's only four words long– it's the "New birth of freedom" which is a kind of Easter message about something has been sacrificed and lost and extinguished– the early idea of America, the constitution and all those millions of compromises with the South that's over now, and we're going to win this war and we're going to build a better country than we ever had. And in a way, it's a new country. It will still be called the United States of America, but it's really America 2.0, and it will be founded upon equal rights for all. We're finally going to live up to the Declaration of Independence, which is the beginning of the Gettysburg Address. That's what "four score and seven years ago" is referring to, it's not the Constitution, it's 1776. And so the "new birth of freedom" will finally put reality into the promises of the Declaration. And that means equal rights for all. That means citizenship for all. That means African-Americans can vote and get married and serve on juries. There are a lot of specific citizenship rights that were debated around the concepts of citizenship. And Lincoln says we're finally going to put America into America, the idea is going to be as powerful as the reality.

Lincoln's leadership

01:27:42:00

EDWARD WIDMER:

I think Lincoln is certainly a product of his time and in many ways he retained kind of old-fashioned beliefs all the way to the end, but he was also pretty adaptive, as the unimaginable reality of total war settled around him in 1861, he's an adaptive military thinker. And that was a big part of his presidency was figuring out what strategies would work to win a kind of war no Americans had ever fought in before and to use new kinds of weapons, to use railroads and telegraphs, which under his leadership, the North did extremely well.

EDWARD WIDMER:

And he was also adaptive in his public communications, I would say. It's not just that he wrote and spoke well. He would often time his best speeches with the nuance of a gifted public relations manager; he was managing his own public relations in some ways. So in 1861, he needs a lot of volunteers to help fight for the North. He writes a beautiful message about what we are fighting for and times it for July 4th, 1861. So it's not a random date, it's a patriotic date. And Gettysburg, he knew that that short speech would be read everywhere and it was. And in other strategic moments, he said the right thing at the right dark moment. The Union war effort was often going very badly and he just always got an uplifting word out to the American people at the right time, maybe by the strategic release of a letter to a newspaper editor. So he's a pretty adaptive communicator in ways that were new, I would say, but he's also old fashioned.

EDWARD WIDMER:

He never gives up this quaint belief in the Declaration of Independence and what it means to all Americans, even as he's quite adaptive about what he means by the phrase, "All Americans." And he really means all Americans. So in that way, he was a real pathbreaker for a country that had never been very clear about who all Americans were. Lincoln is saying all Americans means all Americans.

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