TED WIDMER
LINCOLN'S DILEMMA
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Ted Widmer Interview pt.2
12-09-2020
Interviewed by Jackie Olive & Barak Goodman
Total Running Time: 01:15:30

START TC: 00:00:00:00

SPEAKER:
Edward Widmer Interview, marker.

Two versions of freedom

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EDWARD WIDMER:

Well, it could be argued that each side felt it was fighting for a version of freedom and a version of American history. Fortunately, they had elected in Lincoln, someone who knew American history very well despite almost no formal education.

EDWARD WIDMER:

And he was beginning to put that education on display in his train trip into Washington, especially as he got close to Philadelphia in Independence Hall where he said, "This is what it's all about." It was about creating a better society than the world had ever known, rooted in a vision of human rights. Admittedly, a pretty tough vision to live up to, but still we signed our names to it. Our representatives signed their names to it on behalf of all Americans and that's who we are.

EDWARD WIDMER:

At the same time, Jefferson Davis and his comrades in arms, not quite in arms yet, but about to be, are fighting to establish their own version of America. And they too look back to the American Revolution and arguably to the Declaration itself, which gives permission to peoples to form new governments if they're not happy. But he was not as good as Lincoln was at citing that document as a justification for a meaningful way forward. Lincoln was always looking into the future and Davis, not so much. And Davis' vision was just that much more impoverished. It was about a small number of people who wanted to maintain a status quo that was pretty bad for a large number of people.

EDWARD WIDMER:

So you've got these two presidents with dueling narratives. The Southern version of America has a significant headstart over Lincoln. He's becoming president a few weeks after Jefferson Davis, but in spite of that, Lincoln has the larger vision and the larger understanding of the past. And he's got these gifts that no one fully understands until he's in the office. And then this remarkable transformation begins when this poorly educated under-prepared political hack - no one can quite believe that he's been elected - turns into the most transformative president in our history.

Lincoln's priorities in 1861

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EDWARD WIDMER:

He is trying to keep it all together in the early days. And that means the preservation of the Union. It's a word he's using more and it becomes the most important word of his presidency. The Union must be preserved. And he

later writes a famous letter saying if he could preserve the Union by freeing none of the slaves, he would. And if he could do it by freeing all the slaves, he would.

EDWARD WIDMER:

But at the beginning, freeing all of the slaves is not an option. He's trying to show, not just the South, but very importantly, the border states that he is a calm and wise leader. He's not a bomb thrower, the way he's been described in the Southern press. He really wants to work with the reasonable people who are still in the South. Even in the Southern states that have seceded, there are Unionists and that's something we often forget.

EDWARD WIDMER:

There are people who were part of the Whig Party with Lincoln. He knows many of them. In fact, the Vice President of the Confederacy is a close friend of Lincoln's from when they served in Congress together in the late 1840s. Alexander Stephens, someone he really looks up to and they've been exchanging extremely interesting letters about how they can keep it all together. It's not quite clear if the creation of the Confederacy is a gambit to win some political concessions from Lincoln, or if it's a real country. That's a little unclear on the Confederate side.

EDWARD WIDMER:

And then on the Northern side, it's a little unclear if Lincoln will send troops into the South or broker some kind of settlement, but for the short term, he's coming in trying to lower the temperature and to say to everyone, "I will not interfere with slavery where it exists, but I do object to its illegal expansion into the West and into other countries," which was an issue on his mind that has vanished a little bit from the history books. But Lincoln was very focused on what he knew to be the case, which was that Southern elites and James

Buchanan, the outgoing president were trying pretty hard to expand slavery into northern Mexico and Cuba and around the Gulf of Mexico in a way that would give them new States and new senators. And it would have been totally illegal and against the spirit of the United States as a calm place of democracy where people are free to govern themselves the way they choose to. And to invade Mexico and force slavery into a place that had eliminated slavery was a pretty odd way to advance democracy.

The importance of the border states

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EDWARD WIDMER:

Well, this is one of the ways he was surprisingly well positioned and even gifted. At the beginning of 1860 he's a distant long shot to get the nomination. But more than Seward, he's been traveling around the border states. He's well known to friends and relatives in Kentucky and Illinois is a southern state and a southern state and a western state all at the same time, it's a huge state. And the southern part of Illinois is called Egypt, and it's where a lot of former Southerners, former Virginians and Kentuckians and others from even further south have settled.

EDWARD WIDMER:

And so to be a good Illinois politician, and Stephen Douglas was also one, you have to be comfortable talking to the pro-Southerners who are in Illinois in the South, the centrists in Lincoln's Illinois in the middle, and then the Northern Illinoians in Chicago, near Wisconsin. So Illinois is like a miniature America. And Lincoln has developed a way of talking to Southerners inside the state of Illinois. He also knows people from Missouri, Springfield's on the

train line between Chicago and St. Louis. So he knows people in St. Louis. And he's born in Kentucky and he's from a family with roots in Virginia.

EDWARD WIDMER:

So personally he knows the border States well, but also he just has a cosmic sense that without the border states, the whole country will fall apart. They're crucial to keeping it all together, including around the poorly chosen capital of the United States. Washington D.C. is not really near the Mason-Dixon line, it's way behind it. So the Mason-Dixon line goes between Pennsylvania and Maryland. And then the North-South border becomes the Ohio river for a long stretch all the way down to the Mississippi at Cairo, Illinois. And Washington, DC is a long way south of the Mason Dixon line. And it's south of the state of Maryland, and Maryland is a border state also.

So if Kentucky goes, pretty good chance Virginia goes. And Virginia is huge and includes what is now West Virginia. And if Virginia goes, pretty good chance Maryland goes. And then you've got a capital city that is like what Berlin was like in the middle of the Cold War, this sort of oasis behind enemy lines. And that's a pretty hard city to govern the United States of America from.

The beginning of the Civil War at Fort Sumter

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EDWARD WIDMER:

In March of 1861, Virginia is still in the United States, and we often forget that. It famously joins the Confederacy after the firing on Fort Sumter. Robert E. Lee, the South's greatest general, arguably is from Virginia. But it was really important to Lincoln that Virginia and Maryland were still in the Union when he took the Oath of Office.

EDWARD WIDMER:

So rhetorically, he's very restrained and doesn't say anything inflammatory and really tries to calm things down, both for Virginia's sake and for the good Unionists throughout the South, and they're in every community of the South. And it could be argued that he was really quite slow to respond to the crisis. The biggest step he takes in the spring of 1861 is sending food to a beleaguered fort in the Harbor of Charleston, South Carolina. It's not a very strong military act. But as it turned out, it was enough.

EDWARD WIDMER:

As it turned out the best chess move he could have made. It was like moving a pawn, but it changed the whole way the board looked. And when the Southerners couldn't help themselves and initiated hostilities, that's the beginning of the Civil War. They fire on their fellow Americans who are only trying to hold a federal fort. They're not trying to attack anybody. And that put the onus of starting the war onto South Carolina and their brethren throughout the South. And for the rest of history, that would be true. And we still see the somersaults of pro-Southern apologists saying there was some Northern invasion, but we all know how the war began. And it was because of that brilliant pawn move of Abraham Lincoln's.

The state of the Union Army at the beginning of the war

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EDWARD WIDMER:

Most of the most talented military officers, certainly the army officers, are Southerners. The winning of the Mexican War, which has happened a generation earlier, but most of the heroes of that war are still alive and they're overwhelmingly Southerners, the general officers, but the, the

captains and lieutenants are overwhelmingly Southerners. And West Point is graduating more Southerners than Northerners year after year. West Point itself is quite divided in interesting ways in 1861. And actually West Point graduated two classes of 1861 because they were under such pressure to get officers into the field.

EDWARD WIDMER:

But from a military vantage point, Lincoln doesn't have that much to work with. He's in this badly exposed city that is really in a southern place that's quite dangerous for him. Doesn't have large numbers of troops or weapons. And throughout the slow depressing winter of 1860 to '61, there have been a lot of arms shipments of the corrupt administration of James Buchanan, was shipping huge arms shipments from Northern armories to Southern forts to get ready for the war before it even begins.

EDWARD WIDMER:

It's one of the most treasonous things that has ever happened in our history is that these cabinet officers – the worst of them all was the Secretary of War, John Floyd – they are sworn to defend the United States of America and they're sending armaments from Northern forts to Southern installations in preparation for a war against the United States of America.

EDWARD WIDMER:

So that's happening throughout the winter and Lincoln has to fix all of these problems. And he's got a pretty small mandate. He's one with this tiny percentage, less than 40%, and half of the Republican Party is jealous that he somehow won the nomination in the election. His political network, his personal network is not that great. He doesn't really know people in New England all that well. He's from Springfield, Illinois, which is this sort of hick town way out on the Western frontier. I mean it's got some sophistication, it's

not just rude log cabins the way his campaign material would lead you to believe. But it's still far away and not too many people come out there when he's even running for the presidency. Although by a small miracle, the Prince of Wales is on this goodwill trip throughout America. He comes out and William Seward comes out and Lincoln briefly meets Seward, but not for very long because he doesn't think it's dignified to appear to be politicking.

EDWARD WIDMER:

So he's sort of under-experienced as a politician when he gets to Washington. And the armed forces are not in a good state of repair and he needs to call up a lot of troops, which he has not done for the entire spring, including when Fort Sumter happens. He has not yet, yet done a big call up of the troops. That happens on July 4th. So these things are moving with unbelievable slowness and many of Lincoln's defenders are worried on his behalf that he's not ready for the gravity of the crisis that he's facing

Lincoln's strategy at the outset of the war and his evolving oratory

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Edward Widmer:

I think he hoped that if he spoke in a calm way, publicly and privately, and reassured some of his friends who still were talking to their Southern friends, and in the earliest days of the Civil War, a guy like Andrew Johnson, who later appears in a harsher glare for certain mistakes he made and the relative failure of his own presidency, but he's a Southerner who stays in the United States government. And so he's a senator from Tennessee, there are people like that around that Lincoln can talk to, he hopes, and send a message of conciliation.

And if somehow they can altogether, the voices of reason, calm things down in South Carolina and work out some agreements about the West and the building of maybe two train lines, one that's good for the South, one that's good for the North. It takes passengers and goods from the East Coast all the way out to the Pacific and just use business and wise administration and all the things that Americans have been so good at. And just calmed things down that maybe he can broker a settlement and bring in the seven states. And they're all well-known, these senators have mostly only left in January of 1861, it's just eight weeks before he is sworn in.

EDWARD WIDMER:

So I think he's hoping that somehow he can miraculously calm things down and bring them back. But then they don't come back, and in their language, they are not really conciliatory. Alexander Stephens holds out some garlands that are interesting, but Jefferson Davis not really at all. Jefferson Davis is in love with his own aura. He's the president of this strange new country. And he's not really sending out peace delegations to speak to Lincoln. And conspicuously throughout the fighting of the Civil War up to the very end at Hampton Roads, this peace conference in the early 1865, the best they ever offer is, "We will stop fighting if you recognize our country."

EDWARD WIDMER:

And Lincoln says, "What country? You've never been a country. You're a group of rebels fighting illegally against the authority of the United States of America." That's the line he holds to throughout. And that line is a very strong line actually. And so once they attack, he goes more into that line. And the clearest statement of that line, and it is clear and it is beautiful. And here we begin to have a sense that this unusual man is not only a gifted politician, but is one of the best practitioners of the English language that anyone has seen since Thomas Jefferson.

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EDWARD WIDMER:

And that's high praise indeed. Lincoln comes along and is the first person at Jefferson's level. And the two of them may be alone in the stratosphere at that level. I can't think of anyone else really at that level, but Lincoln first with his proclamation of July 4th, 1861, which it's a state of the Union before anyone asks for it. It's a call up of troops of 75,000 volunteers. It's also a statement of progress.

EDWARD WIDMER:

Annual messages were usually done in December and he does do those and they're also amazing. But here he's doing one in July, "Just here's my midterm report. This is how things are going." And he reports on the government as he inherited it. And the crisis of Fort Sumter, which was a crisis that intensified on the day of his inaugural and on March 4th, 1861, he's fresh off of this big speech and big crowd. People congratulating him and he gets a letter saying, "Oh, by the way, everyone at Fort Sumter, we're going to run out of food if you don't provision us." And so he tells that story and then the story of the South beginning the war. So he's a historian of the Civil War already.

EDWARD WIDMER:

It's barely begun, but he's already the historian of that war in a very interesting way. And that will continue in all of his great orations throughout the war, way better than Jefferson Davis. He runs circles around Jefferson Davis as the historian of the conflict that they are both fighting. And then he tells this very beautiful story, which is even above the line, above the line of the United States of America must maintain its authority or it's a joke as a government and as a country. But then there's an even more beautiful story beneath that one, which is that the right and the ability of people on earth,

anywhere on earth for all time, to govern themselves in a democratic way, in a reasonably democratic way, it doesn't have to be the same everywhere, but that right will be destroyed if the world's leading experiment falls on its face in 1861.

EDWARD WIDMER:

So he's saying, it's not just for us now. It is for us, but it's for our children and all people in our country, but all people everywhere. And that's a really important story. That's one of the reasons we love Lincoln. That's one of the reasons we look into the sad eyes and all those photographs and see something a little bit deeper than just a president of his time. And we see someone connecting with us.

EDWARD WIDMER:

And all these unusual people in the 20th century, Tolstoy lives into the 20th century, he loves just looking at Lincoln's face. And a little before that, the leaders of French liberal Republican thinking in the 1860s and '70s, the people behind ultimately the Statue of Liberty, they all saw Lincoln as a role model for what they hoped would come to France some day.

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EDWARD WIDMER:

Walt Whitman, who sees Lincoln in the flesh multiple times. He's so moved by seeing him come through New York that he moves to Washington to be closer to Lincoln, and to his brother who is a volunteer in the war, but just to be closer to this great effort to save democracy for all time.

EDWARD WIDMER:

And unusual leaders of independence movements, democracy movements in South Asia, Africa, East Asia, throughout the 20th century, including

movements of people who did not love the United States government in the middle and late 20th century, but they saw something in Lincoln that spoke to the aspirations of ordinary people, poor people, people who worked with their hands to build something up for themselves and make a decent life and a decent living and have an honest government educating their children, not overtaxing them, but delivering certain services to them. That is Lincoln's message. And slavery completely violates the decency of that message. And Lincoln called it out and he got better in every message. So there's a kind of leapfrogging process from the first inaugural to the July 4, 1861, proclamation, to the annual messages, 1861, 1862. The 1862 one is one of the most beautiful things.

The role the enslaved themselves had in securing emancipation

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EDWARD WIDMER:

It is becoming clearer to historians, and you know we have to recognize this with some embarrassment at our slowness, but that African-Americans were not waiting around for white Americans to free them at any stage of this long drawn-out national process. The story of Frederick Douglass is very well known now, and that's helping as it should be, and that's helping to shine a light on other brave African-American men and women who freed themselves successfully, or in some cases freed themselves for a while and were recaptured and brought back into slavery. And there's a really interesting body of historical work now looking at cases of young African-American men and women who were recaptured by roving U.S. Marshals working on behalf of a pro-slavery U.S. government, which it mostly was before Lincoln.

EDWARD WIDMER:

So the U.S. Marshal coming into your town in Ohio was a terrifying thing if you were African-American. The sight of the American flag, which for most of us fills us with feelings of love of freedom, was something close to the opposite if you were a young African-American in Ohio or Southern Pennsylvania or Maryland. The Maryland state song is still a pretty chilling celebration of the right of enslavers to have their property free of tyrants, meaning Lincoln, who are trying to block that right. These definitions of freedom flew in each others' face, and the enslavers felt that they were free under the protection of the U.S. flag with the muscle of U.S. Marshals to go into Northern states, grab their property, meaning escaped slaves, and haul them back to their plantations. But a better way of thinking was always present, and there were sympathetic Northerners who believed it, and then there were very brave African-Americans on plantations who voted for emancipation by walking off the plantation and trying to get out of there.

And that was the beginning of emancipation way before Lincoln signs the Emancipation Proclamation. One piece of evidence I found very interesting in my own research, is throughout the campaign of 1860, enslaved African-Americans are aware that an unusual politician is coming to end their bondage. It's a situation in which they are already beginning to feel that this Moses-like figure is coming to end their bondage, like the story of the Bible, which they know. They know a lot, and they know that there are many candidates, and they know that their masters hate this one candidate, and they know that's enough for them to want this candidate to win. I found very moving testimony recorded in the 1930s by former slaves who lived that, I mean, if there are teenagers or in their twenties, they could live into the 1930s, and there was a lot of really great oral history done in the '20s and '30s, and former slaves said we knew, we knew this guy was coming, and our masters told us terrible lies about him. They said he was a cannibal coming in who would eat every one of the African race.

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EDWARD WIDMER:

It's not so distant from the crazy kinds of conspiracy theories we hear all the time, even in the second and third decades of the 21st century. We haven't evolved that far. We still are afraid of cannibals. You'd think we might've moved beyond that, but we haven't. But then some people on plantations, some enslaved people, believed incorrectly that the moment Lincoln won, which was November 6, 1861, they were free that night. And so there were cases of slaves walking off of plantations, just thinking, okay, it's all over, and I'm going to walk to the North, and they didn't know that it was harder than that. So there was some confusion.

EDWARD WIDMER:

There was also a fear on behalf of white slave owners, that there would be a wave of poisonings. There was fear on both sides. White families were terrified that the enslaved men and women who grew their crops, who gathered their crops, who prepared their meals, were poisoning their food. That's how crazy things were getting after Lincoln won. And that was part of the reason he was just trying to calm things down and get into the White House without too much damage, and then see how much he could patch it together.

EDWARD WIDMER:

But after Fort Sumter and the beginnings of hostilities, although in a kind of slow way at first, it was very unclear what role able-bodied young African-American men would play. And it was important early in the war for Lincoln to continue this policy of saying we will not interfere with slavery where it exists, but as enslaved young men, primarily, but later there were

families, began to escape, they looked to make their way to Northern installations, and Fort Sumter is not the only Northern-held Fort.

EDWARD WIDMER:

There's a really interesting fort called Fort Monroe at the mouth of the James River, where it opens up into the Atlantic Ocean. A good friend of mine named Adam Goodheart has done beautiful research on all of the layers of history in that fort, but it's the spot where the James River opens up where the first slave vessel came into what is now the United States of America, if you don't count Florida, but into the more northern part, the original 13 colonies, and in 1619, that first slave ship from Africa came into the James River right there, and that's where Fort Monroe was in 1861, where the first African-American men began to show up saying, "I'm escaping, I'm here to volunteer for whatever you need me for."

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EDWARD WIDMER:

And that was a political hot potato for the generals who ran the fort and then for Lincoln, too. And they didn't even know what word to use, because these were no longer slaves, they were not yet citizens. They would become citizens, but all of those terms were loaded. The term 'citizen' was the word at the heart of the Dred Scott decision, which had gone against African-Americans, to Lincoln's anger. So the temporary word they used for an uncomfortable period of time was 'contraband.' Contraband means something you acquire in war. You might take over someone's house or a horse or an arms arsenal, but it became increasingly clear that a lot of human beings were getting out of the South where they didn't want to be and getting to the North where they did want to be.

EDWARD WIDMER:

And they were able bodied and capable and intelligent. And as their numbers came in and ever greater numbers, it began to be clear to a Northern side that needed able-bodied men in uniform, that this was going to change from a problem to an advantage, and it did. And so over 1861, and then 1862, and then 1863, this becomes one of the greatest means of showing his own people and the rest of the world that he can evolve. This becomes an issue in which we see really dramatic change from Abraham Lincoln, who refused to touch slavery where it exists in 1861, although he did resist its expansion, to suddenly he's coming after slavery pretty aggressively in a way that really puts the U.S. flag behind the ultimate abolition of slavery. So Abraham Lincoln, sometimes a bit half-hearted in his own abolitionism, becomes the greatest abolitionist in American history.

EDWARD WIDMER:

It is absolutely fair to say that courageous African-American men and women were pushing Lincoln and other politicians from all backgrounds. Some were a little ahead of Lincoln, many were behind Lincoln, were pushing all of them to make America America for everybody, to use the formulation Langston Hughes used in the 20th century… But to put real meaning into the words of the Declaration of Independence and confer real citizenship on everybody and give them the right and the honor and the difficulty of fighting for their adoptive country. They wanted to fight to show that they were real Americans, and they proved their courage beyond any shadow of a doubt.

Frederick Douglass' upbringing and escape

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EDWARD WIDMER:

The life story of Frederick Douglass is one of the great life stories of American history. And it's right up there with his occasional partner and occasional irritant, Abraham Lincoln. These two Titanic lives of the 19th century are happening in full view right alongside each other, and right up there with a life like Ben Franklin's in the 18th century. It's a rags-to-riches story beyond even Lincoln's, and that's saying something. So he grows up in slavery on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. I used to live near where he grew up. It's a beautiful part of America. And in a way, his saving grace was that he grew up on a very large plantation, far from the plantation house where there would have been a lot of discipline. And he grew up in a more rustic location until he was summoned to the house, but he had a bit of freedom from growing up in a more remote location near the woods.

EDWARD WIDMER:

Then a second blessing that happened to him was he was sent into Baltimore, where he was still a slave, but he was a city slave, not a plantation slave, and so his talents were recognized, and he learned to deal in a fast-paced situation with people in a city. He's picking up the rudiments of literacy. And he's got a tremendous capacity for learning, obviously. So all of these talents and some good luck were already present in his early formation, but for a few things turning out differently, he never would have escaped a brutal system in forced labor and family separation. A few things happened to go his way, and then he was never shy about taking advantage of a break when he saw one. So he at great risk to himself, he dressed up, I believe like a sailor, and got onto a northbound train in Baltimore and hoped that no one would recognize him, and went ultimately into the North to New Bedford, where he lived for a while in the heart of abolitionism in Massachusetts, and then up to Rochester, New York, where he lives for a long time and finds sympathetic friends, including leaders of the women's movement of that time, people like Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and along that

interesting information corridor from Buffalo through Syracuse and Rochester to Albany, where they're not only surrounded by sympathetic liberal-minded people, but they're on a corridor of information, communications, newspapers, railroads, even things like eyeglasses. New York, Upstate New York, is incredible at this time, and it's very welcoming to immigrants also.

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EDWARD WIDMER:

And Douglass, literacy is no problem for him. Then pretty soon he's publishing his own newspaper and spreading his gospel of freedom and empowerment to thousands of others in writing and rewriting the story of his self-emancipation. So he's lighting a kind of fire under politicians including Lincoln, and their own relationship of growing respect is one of the more beautiful stories of the Civil War.

Lincoln's move toward emancipation

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EDWARD WIDMER:

The year 1861, we do not see rapid growth of Lincoln on the subject of emancipation. We see him trying to keep together a leaky vessel, of trying to keep the border states in the North, which he mostly succeeds at. He loses Virginia, but he keeps Kentucky and Missouri and Maryland. And to just get some general officers leading and to create an army for them to lead and to not lose Washington, D.C., which is always on the front lines of a struggle. It was very dangerously exposed to a Southern army that was better prepared than the North was. And to begin to win Northern public opinion at a time when the North is in shock that a Civil War has actually begun. The worst

thing anyone could think of has happened, and an inexperienced man who won less than 40% is suddenly in charge, so he's just got to survive his own first year.

EDWARD WIDMER:

Then as 1862 opens up, the end of slavery is suddenly in sight. And if you take a step back and look at how rapidly these things are happening within not too many months, abolition of slavery is suddenly, and that was unthinkable, is suddenly on the table. There's a cabinet meeting on July 22, 1862, in which Lincoln begins to talk about it with his cabinet, that is only a year and four months, four and a half months from his inauguration.

EDWARD WIDMER:

It's not that long, actually. So people do complain about Lincoln's slowness with some fairness, but the wheels are turning. And on that day, he begins to sketch his plan for the Emancipation Proclamation, and throughout the summer, he is working on it including in August, there's a complicated day where he meets some African-American leaders. And he says some things that are not that visionary. He's sort of thinking off the top of his head and saying, "Would you prefer just your own society where you can make your own rules and we'll help you, but we won't all be in the same society?" That sounds terrible today.

EDWARD WIDMER:

And then he has been criticized for saying that, but at the very moment he's saying that, he's hard at work on the draft of what will become the Emancipation Proclamation. So it's as if he's sort of thinking aloud about a reality he knows is never going to happen.

EDWARD WIDMER:

So Lincoln is driving hard toward that America at the same time as that meeting. And he has a rough draft on August – at the end of every month. September 22nd is the rough draft, and then it's finally issued formally on January 1, 1863, and it's a complex document. It has famously, but a historian at Columbia University, Richard Hofstadter, famously said it has "all of the moral grandeur of a bill of lading." A bill of lading is like a bill you give your grocer for the things you're buying. There's no grandeur in it at all. But Lincoln is so smart. He's trying to make sure that this revolutionary document that is turning American history on its head, that it sails through a Congress and an American body of public opinion that is not as far along as he is.

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EDWARD WIDMER:

He's been behind a lot of the leaders like Frederick Douglass, other abolitionists. He's caught up and he's now engineering radical social change. The word 'radical' is abused all the time in our politics. This was about the most radical instance of social change engineered by a president that we have ever seen in our history, for a good cause.

The significance of the Emancipation Proclamation

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EDWARD WIDMER:

The Emancipation Proclamation was a tremendous symbolic victory for people who didn't believe slavery had any place in a country founded on democracy and human rights as it was in the Declaration of Independence. It's founded both on human rights and on slavery. And that was a tension that was present at the beginning. But if you believed, as Lincoln did, that the

human rights were more beautiful and ultimately stronger, then ultimately push would have to come to shove, and it did in that document. So it plants a flag, the American flag, on the side of anti-slavery in a pretty dramatic way, which had an immediate foreign policy impact that both England and France are waffling in the first two years of the war, sending tacit messages of support, and some money and ships and arms to both sides. Suddenly if they're supporting the South, they're anti-America, they're pro-slavery, which isn't great for London or Paris.

EDWARD WIDMER:

They're dealing with their own peoples who are excited about democracy, and it's not great for their governments to be pro-slavery, but it has immediate impact. There are places in the South where Northern troops are making progress. They are making inroads into the South, and as they free slaves in those places, they do become free immediately. So it's not just an imaginary proclamation of freedom for no one except on paper. This is a hard war being fought foot-by-foot in Virginia and Tennessee and the Carolinas, and ultimately the Deep South and the Mississippi Valley. So it is a war measure in those places. And it gives hope to everyone. It gives the Northern soldiers a feeling that for every hundred yards they make progress, they might find some new troops to help them, but they're fighting for a great cause, and that helps in a war. It helps to feel like your cause is better.

Black combatants in the Union Army change Northern perceptions

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EDWARD WIDMER:

Some Northern generals are asking for black troops earlier in the war, and Lincoln has to roll back some measures of emancipation issued by his

generals in the field a little earlier than he's comfortable. John Frémont, for example, tries to free slaves in Missouri, and Lincoln countermands that measure, but other generals, including Ulysses Grant, are beginning to see the wisdom of it. And Northerners are, some more than others, are calling for it, or in some cases raising their own regiments of African-Americans. And famously, the 54th Massachusetts goes into a lethal conflict in the Carolinas, and they fight valiantly and at great cost to themselves and to their commanding officer, Robert Gould Shaw.

EDWARD WIDMER:

As Northern Americans are reading newspaper stories of terrible battles, bloody battles fought, they're reading about heroic African-American soldiers fighting alongside their comrades-in-arms, but also alongside white comrades-in-arms. They're fighting together for a single cause of the United States of America. And that's a very powerful reason to emancipate all of these Americans who've been waiting a long time for their freedom.

The failing war effort in 1861-1862

00:49:06:00

EDWARD WIDMER:

Well, the first two years are a very hard time for Lincoln and the North. They lose battles outright, or there are a number of very costly stalemates, at best. There's no ringing victory and, and the South does win battles and is able to persuade its own people that it's really succeeding at building up this new country, which it would have been in Lincoln's strong interest to snuff out a rebellion, to use his own word, in the bud. You don't want a rebellion to survive year after year. That makes the Confederacy seem more like a normal country. And as it develops its own systems of mail, for example, or

transportation systems or taxation systems or currency, stamps, it begins to seem a lot more like a normal country, which is not what Lincoln wants. He wants it to seem like a crazy rebellion. That is anti-American, that he will quickly end and reunite the broken family and then get back to normal. But it's surely not normal. And it is not until the middle of 1863, that you start to see some real victories happening for the North in general, and for Grant in particular.

Lincoln's search for meaning in the war

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EDWARD WIDMER:

I don't think there's any doubt that Lincoln is carrying a heavy burden of tragedy inside him. And that begins to feed his emotional language. As he seeks an explanation for the terrible suffering on both sides of a conflict that is dividing the American family. And he's probably remembering the tragedies of his own childhood in his family deep in the past, on the Indiana frontier when his mother and sister died and then the tragic family circumstances close to home, his beloved son Willy dies probably from drinking toxic water in Washington, D.C. in February of 1862, an unspeakable loss for Lincoln and his wife. And as he seeks to make a kind of cosmic sense out of all of this loss, he does find a deeper register, which we really here at Gettysburg better than ever, but you there are glimpses of it coming in the annual messages.

Lincoln's annual message to Congress in 1862

00:52:23:00

EDWARD WIDMER:

In that that speech he's, he's using some unusual words and he's using them to do something really quite surprising, which is to say that we have a new history beginning and the Lincoln I paid a lot of attention to over the winter of 1860 to 61 is someone who reveres American history and who says, we need to live up to the spirit of the founders, especially the declaration of independence and keep this beautiful experiment going. That, that's what they would want us to do. And if we can just live up to the declaration, we will be doing a lot. In late 1862 he begins to talk about a new history. He uses the word disenthrall to describe a kind of intellectual freedom that he's seeking for himself. And it's a really interesting word. It comes from an old Norse etymology to get out of thrall, thrall as a kind of servitude. It's a kind of like indentured servitude where you sign yourself away for seven years to work for someone. And he's saying, let's get out of our thrall.

EDWARD WIDMER:

Lincoln, by the way, knew something about indentured servitude. And he'd been a kind of renter of his own labor to his father and to other people in his teenage years. So he knew a lot about what that word meant, but he's also seeking to free himself as a president to do some things that other presidents would not have done. And he's capable of very bold actions. He's building trains and telegraphs across the entire country. He's sending enormous numbers of immigrant families into the West with the homestead act through a complex system of financing that channels the sale of public lands into public universities. It's like the backbone of our public university system. He's shoring up the economy in some ways that are quite interesting and new sort of reinventing the presidency in a bigger way than anyone since Jackson or Jefferson, and really on a bigger scale than either.

EDWARD WIDMER:

But ultimately he's working up to solving the biggest problem in American history, which is the end of this unfair and immoral system of permanent racial slavery. And so he's hinting in this annual message at the end of 1862 to the Emancipation Proclamation, which is coming soon. And then the Gettysburg address, which is sort of the delicate intellectual argument around that legal change.

The Gettysburg Address

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EDWARD WIDMER:

The Gettysburg address probably began to take shape in Lincoln's mind around the time he got the news of the battle, it was an absolutely crushing defeat for Robert Lee in the South. It was the defeat of Lee that Lincoln had been waiting for, for years. And he gives a short but interesting speech to serenaders who come to visit him at the white house. And he's just obviously so happy. And then separately, a plan takes shape in Pennsylvania for a cemetery to bury the dead. It's a grim task, but a noble task cloaked with the majesty of the cause that they were fighting to defend. And that becomes the theme of the speech. And Lincoln has been getting there all along. So from the moment he calls up the troops on July 4th, 1861 and says, this is a people's contest. We're fighting for democracy.

EDWARD WIDMER:

And then each of the annual messages where he hits that point again, saying we are fighting not only for our own country, but for a good country for our children to live in. And for all people who love democracy. And so the idea's been out there, he has nurtured it and developed it, but never will he ever express it with the economy and the stark beauty that he does in the

ceremony at Gettysburg, November 19th, 1863. His own role was unclear. An invitation went out to the greatest orator of his day, Edward Everett. Who's a kind of orator for rent. If you've got a patriotic occasion, he's your guy. You want to raise money for Mount Vernon, send out an Edward Everett, Lafayette, Daniel Webster. You know, it doesn't even matter almost – Edward Everett is your guy. And so he is summoned and he predictably and this was his job.

EDWARD WIDMER:

So Lincoln's role in the ceremony is unclear. The main speech is from Edward Everett and everyone girds themself for a long oration and they get it and that's what they wanted. And so Lincoln, as president and leader of the military effort, the reason for the cemetery stands up and speaks for probably about two minutes, 272 words. They're almost all monosyllabic or not much more than that. And somehow in those two minutes says with greater beauty and concision than anyone has ever said before, or since what is the meaning of America? It's incredible. And he says, not only that the meaning was to live up to the words of the Declaration of Independence, but that it's okay to start an America 2.0. He doesn't use that expression, of course, but that something has actually died. It's not just the thousands of brave young men from both sides who are buried there, but that an inconsistent and messy country didn't really work, which is why it led to a civil war that is now finished.

00:59:21:00

EDWARD WIDMER:

It's a kind of chapter of American history that is over and we are now ready. And he is declaring the beginning of “a new birth of freedom.” It's a crucial phrase. It's only four words long, in a way it's rooted in the story of Jesus in the Bible: something dies for something beautiful to be born. And it's all the more haunting because we have a powerful sense – we in the history

business – that the speaker of those words is not going to be on earth a whole lot longer and is in fact going to be killed on the day Jesus was crucified. And that was a coincidence people made a lot of noise about in 1865. And we don't have to overdo it, but it is a powerful thing to know that as Lincoln is talking about a new birth of freedom, he will not be alive for that much longer.

EDWARD WIDMER:

So he finishes the Gettysburg Address. People clap politely and he sits down and it took some time for the majesty of the speech to be evident. And to the credit of Edward Everett, he wrote a note to Lincoln, understanding it. He said, "I should flatter myself if I came as close to the central message of the occasion in my two hours, as you did in your two minutes." And Lincoln writes a very gracious note back saying "You could not have been forgiven to give a short speech and I could not have been forgiven to give a long one – we each did our job well." Classic Lincoln answer, but one has the sense he knew he had written something special. And he wrote a few manuscript copies to raise money for good causes. And those are now cherished holy grails of American history that, I mean, there's one in the Lincoln bedroom, in the white house, there are a few others around, but it really is the shortest and best statement of what we believe are secular scripture that we believe in as Americans.

Competition for the election of 1864

01:01:48:00

EDWARD WIDMER:

Well, to an amazing degree, Lincoln has challengers from his own side throughout this existential conflict for America's success as a republic. He's

got plenty of enemies on the Confederate side, and then he's got plenty of enemies on his own side. He's got enemies inside his own cabinet and his Secretary of Treasury, Salmon P. Chase, who's paying for the war, is secretly scheming to get the Republican nomination for 1864, but without much success.

EDWARD WIDMER:

But then he's got disgruntled former army officers, George McClellan, who is scheming successfully for the Democratic nomination. And the Democratic Party is a really powerful party. It's the party that has won the presidency for most of American history. It's true. It's divided in half in 1864 because the Southern half is in the South, but still there are a lot of Northern Democrats. So Lincoln is quite worried that a charismatic general, no one ever wants to run against a popular general. And McClellan is. He's handsome in a way that Lincoln is not, we've grown used to loving Lincoln's face because we grow up with it. It's almost there with our school lunchboxes. It's just part of the world we look around when we're in fourth grade, there's Lincoln.

EDWARD WIDMER:

In 1864, McClellan was considered a very handsome man with his perfect mustache and his perfect coiffure. Lincoln really– no one would ever say that. And so he's got problems of aesthetics. He's got problems of a city of Washington that is not entirely convinced he's the sort of dignified president they want for this huge war effort. He's got a diplomatic corps while they're not exactly against him, but they're not really for him either. He's got a lot of troops in the field who might vote for one of their own, a soldier who's running against Lincoln. And he's got a lot of problems. He's had a lot of setbacks and the economy, the financing of the war is difficult. And so he's got problems everywhere he looks.

01:04:37:00

EDWARD WIDMER:

And the Emancipation Proclamation, which we now consider his greatest tangible policy achievement is almost as unpopular as it is popular in 1863 and 1864. There are a lot of people, including George McClellan, who are not thrilled about the Emancipation Proclamation. So Lincoln's got his work cut out for him.

EDWARD WIDMER:

Lincoln's victory was an inspiring vindication of the democracy he believed in. It was also a pretty impressive political win for a canny strategist of how to win an election, which with the wisdom of time that we get as historians, you can see certain things that Lincoln was doing that were within his power to do, but he strategically released certain soldiers to go back home and vote for him at the crucial moment before being recalled to the front. And that was some good politicking at the crucial moment in 1864.

EDWARD WIDMER:

He wanted to win on the high ground and he did, he wrote the best speeches in our history, but he knew that to get up to that high ground, he had to win the elections and sometimes releasing a few thousand men here or there to vote in a tough place, like Pittsburgh– he was not above the crucial order to let those men go back home and presumably vote for him. He wouldn't tell them how to vote, but he knew how they would vote.

The hypothetical consequences of a McClellan election victory in 1864

01:06:26:00

EDWARD WIDMER:

The losing of the election of 1864 would have brought in a leader of the military who was even though trained in military matters much less visionary as a commander in chief than Lincoln had become by 1864. Lincoln is a neophyte as a commander at the beginning of the war, but he's picked up a lot of experience, including– there are new arts of war. There are the arts of moving railroads, full of supplies and men very quickly across a railroad landscape. Lincoln understands that kind of modern war very well. Or sending by telegraph the most up-to-the-minute information and not waiting for pieces of paper to be given to men on horses. Lincoln is a kind of a communications visionary in a way that's quite impressive. And he's always going to the Telegraph office next to the house in the war department every night.

EDWARD WIDMER:

And so I think he's a better commander of information than McClellan was. McClellan is a more old-fashioned– he's learned French military tactics, which were the tactics dujour at the beginning of the Civil War, but McClellan had his chance. Lincoln would have been waiting for his big victory forever if he hadn't relieved him from duty. So probably there would have been more of McClellan's cautious style of leadership, which probably would have led to a brokered stalemate and two countries that's the likely result of the election. And so we would have had the very strange and depressing future of a successful rebellion that led to a successful new country called the Confederate States of America, founded on the exact opposite of the freedom that the United States of America is founded upon, and would really, I think have negated everything good in the founding documents of the USA and Europe could have said those two halves cancel each other out. We don't have to pay any attention to democracy at all.

EDWARD WIDMER:

Instead, by winning the election and the war and the public relations war that was always a part of the military strategy, Lincoln made it safe to love democracy again, and that made it safe. It's a bit of a hackneyed phrase that Woodrow Wilson used, but it wasn't hackneyed at all in World War II when we were fighting another existential threat to give human beings a chance to govern themselves, that was what we were fighting for in World War II. And I believe that if Lincoln had not won the election of 1864, Franklin D. Roosevelt with the allies would not have won World War II in anywhere near as impressive or as uplifting a way as they did in the middle decade of the 20th century.

Frederick Douglass' encounter with Lincoln after the second inaugural

01:09:55:00

Edward Widmer:

Like Gettysburg, that speech sort of settled and did not immediately strike people as a great oration with a couple of fascinating exceptions, including Frederick Douglass was right there and Lincoln saw him, and this is such a beautiful story and it's hard not to get a little emotional remembering it, but Douglass went to the reception right after. And by the way, John Wilkes Booth is also right there, right in the audience and wrote to a friend saying, "What a chance I had to kill Lincoln that day."

EDWARD WIDMER:

And then somewhere near Booth is Douglass, Lincoln's toughest critic. And he went to a reception in the White House and he was told he could not go in. And he got word to Lincoln somehow. Douglass got through, even to the last moment of this day of celebration, this last insult, he was not allowed into the

White House for the reception for Lincoln. And Lincoln heard about it and he had someone get Douglass, brought him in past the guard who wouldn't let him in. And Lincoln looked at him and Lincoln looked people in the eye and said, "What did you think of that speech?" And Douglass looked right back at him and he said, "Mr. President, that was a sacred effort."

EDWARD WIDMER:

And it's a beautiful moment where Douglass is finally seeing what Lincoln was capable of. And Lincoln is also getting a little extra gratification that this guy's been pretty hard on him, with good reason, but he has been, and they are having a meeting of minds right at that moment. And it's all the more moving, knowing what will happen in the weeks ahead.

The reaction to Lincoln's assassination

01:12:01:00

EDWARD WIDMER:

Immediately, the night of the assassination and the day after, it became clear that something of the highest importance had happened to the United States of America, that it was a national tragedy to lose a President in this moment of supreme victory for the cause. Not entirely unlike Franklin Roosevelt's death in April 1945, as the U.S. was about to win another great struggle, but even more tragically than that one.

EDWARD WIDMER:

And as they began to think about him and to miss him, and the whole story was just so sad of being carried across the street and dying slowly in that bed that didn't fit his long frame in the Peterson house and his wife losing her composure and his son losing his... You know, it was just so tragic and it was a

kind of family tragedy and the knowledge that they had lost their son earlier in the war. It all helped Americans feel that this guy who suffered a lot already, suffered for them, that he was a kind of absorber of the people's pain, which I think was true to some extent.

EDWARD WIDMER:

He had felt pain in his life before he was President. He was a well-known depressive. He'd worked hard to overcome mental illness or depression or mood disorders, whatever you want to call them. He was strong as a result. And in his acceptance of some of the harder side of our national story, he spoke all the better for that reason, for the awareness of tragedy inside his own life and inside America's story.

EDWARD WIDMER:

We are not all moonbeams and greeting cards, you know? There has been real hardship in the building of this great nation. And he spoke a little bit more realistically than anyone who'd come before him and arguably more so than anyone after him.

EDWARD WIDMER:

So a national outpouring of grief began on the night of April 14th to 15th. He dies at 7:22 AM on the morning of the 15th, and that was Easter weekend. He was shot in the night of what had been Good Friday, the day of the crucifixion and he dies on Saturday. And that was Easter Sunday, the next day. So every minister in America gave a sermon about Lincoln and Jesus. There were hundreds of them. I found one given by the ancestor of the two Presidents Bush. He was a clergyman in New Jersey. But everyone, every minister and priest and rabbi was thinking about the Christ story.

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