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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CREW MEMBER:

Edward Widmer interview. Mark. Barak, give us 30 seconds to sell and it's all yours.

Lincoln's term in Congress

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EDWARD WIDMER:

In Lincoln's first visit to Washington, his first time as an elected leader, he lives in Washington for two years as a Congressman from Illinois, pretty low ranking on the totem pole, but he's there. He's in the Capitol. He's really happy to be there. He loves history among other things. So there are some signs of his going out to events like the dedication of the Washington monument, where he might've met Dolly Madison and he might've met the widow of Alexander Hamilton. So going back to the beginnings of American history. And he's there on the floor of the house when John Quincy Adams had his attack and then died shortly afterwards. So he's thrilled to be in the center of American politics, but he's also, I think, a bit challenged by the

nature of politics, conservative, slow moving, and on this one matter of slavery, nothing is happening to change at all.

EDWARD WIDMER:

So slavery exists in Washington. There are slave auctions in the District and across the river in Alexandria, and there are other odious restrictions including something that is not well remembered now, but I found in my research. There's actually a fence around the Capitol with a name. The Capitol was called, it was on the hill where it still is, of course, and at the very top of this hill is a fence and inside it was called the Capital Enclosure, and inside that fence, African-Americans were not allowed to go. So it was a sort of apartheid within Washington that Lincoln objected to, and he tried to introduce legislation banning the sale of slaves at auction in D.C. That's not even close to ending slavery in D.C. It's just ending the sale of human beings up on auction blocks in a really undignified way.

EDWARD WIDMER:

And realized there was no support for the measure, and I believe it was not even submitted or submitted, but not voted upon. So that was a lesson in realpolitik for Abraham Lincoln, that he understood the South really controlled the pace of legislation in Washington. And I believe that was true. The South had gamed the system and it not only had a preponderance always of leaders of the Committees of the Senate and House, but it had almost all of the presidents, a whole lot of the Supreme Court justices. And Washington D.C. is a southern city. It's well below the Mason Dixon line. It's surrounded by slave holding states on both sides and you have to go a long way before

you get to Pennsylvania, and so I think Lincoln understood what he was up against at that moment.

EDWARD WIDMER:

He also gave a pretty brave speech against a popular war, the Mexican War, that instead of earning him approval, earned him ridicule. I mean, he was kind of like an extreme, out-of-touch liberal in his first term in Congress. And so when he went back humiliated to Illinois– he thought it was the end of his political career. And it might have been if it had not been for the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 that got him so mad that he came out of his political retirement and had a chapter two that turned into a pretty impressive chapter. We should all be so lucky to have that kind of a chapter two.

The importance of the border states to Lincoln

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EDWARD WIDMER:

Well, they're incredibly important in 1860 and '61. He doesn't win any of them in the election, but the fact that he's even from a part of the country near the border state and he's born in one of them, he was born in Kentucky. That helped him to get the nomination that he was not from Washington, but was from out there in the real America, and helped him to speak to people in the Southern parts of states that were not exactly border states. But like Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, they're adjacent to border states. And he just was

understood to be a kind of a political leader who could speak to those people who were wavering, but it was an existential matter for the country.

EDWARD WIDMER:

If Maryland goes out of the country you lose the capital, Washington, DC, which is suddenly a drift between Maryland and Virginia. Virginia did go out. Maryland did not, barely. But Kentucky's a tremendously important state. The state of Lincoln's birth. The state of his hero, Henry Clay, who was the great architect of the American system and a very wealthy state, and also a state with a lot of shoreline along the Ohio river. And that's a vital artery of American commerce. And Missouri has a lot of land along the Mississippi river.

EDWARD WIDMER:

So if you lose any of them, you're losing some crucial piece of the jigsaw puzzle. And Lincoln understood that it would also, it would be a mortal threat to his legitimacy as a barely legitimate new president anyway. So he was just absolutely determined to keep those border states in, including Virginia.

We don't often list Virginia as a border state because it actually went into the Confederacy, but it stayed in the Union just long enough for him to get to Washington to become president. And that was important, Virginia is right across the river and it's the home of all the presidents, most of them. So he needed every shred of legitimacy that he could find and he kept them.

EDWARD WIDMER:

I do think Lincoln's extreme caution regarding the border states slowed down emancipation. There were times he was going very, very slowly toward it,

including the first year of his presidency. And then at other times he moves quite swiftly toward it, including the middle and second half of 1862. He was trying compensated emancipation, gradual emancipation. There's an early effort to get emancipation through Delaware, which is a small state, but another form of a border state. It has a small number of slaves, it's right next to Philadelphia, pretty Northern city. And that seemed for a while, like a good test case for the slow approach to emancipation with compensation and just taking it slowly. But the state rejected his overture. And in the end, all of the states rejected his cautious approach. So halfway through 1862 he changed everything up.

The preliminary Emancipation Proclamation's importance

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EDWARD WIDMER:

It's an important moment for a few reasons. First of all, the timing was exquisite at the cabinet meeting in July, July 22nd, where he first presents his draft of the Emancipation. William Seward who's always such a good advisor, says, "We don't want to issue it now when it feels like we've had a few setbacks on the battlefield. We want to issue it when we've got higher ground in every sense, military, as well as moral." And so Lincoln waited until the Battle of Antietam, which was a very costly victory, but it was a victory. And it's issued five days after the Battle of Antietam.

EDWARD WIDMER:

But also, Lincoln said something else at the meeting in September, he said that once Lee had gone into Maryland into the North, he took the battle into the North, Lincoln said he made a promise to God. It's interesting. Lincoln who's been pretty secular a lot of his life is discovering this very rich vein of spirituality and a personal relationship with God. And that's one of the most interesting characteristics of Lincoln, especially in the last two or three years of his life. And he said that if Lee was stopped, he would honor his promise to God to begin emancipation.

EDWARD WIDMER:

So there's something not political happening inside of Lincoln, something really more spiritual. And that's a big deal. That's really interesting. It's also a military measure because by doing it with some time to wait before January 1st, he's giving the South a chance to negotiate. Maybe some of those states might want to come back into the Union before January 1st and could even keep some of their human property, but none of them do.

Lincoln & colonization policy

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EDWARD WIDMER:

Well, it's like a lot of issues with Lincoln, he does change over time and he's always very sensitive to public opinion. And as a politician, he's aware of it – opinion in Congress as well as in the public at large. And he was interested in colonization as a younger politician. And as he comes into the White House, he continues to be. And it's mentioned in those early annual messages and he

mentions it famously in a somewhat notorious meeting that he has with African-American leaders in August 1862, when he really pushes it on them and uses some very unfortunate language saying, "Our races don't like living together. Wouldn't you all just like to go live somewhere else?" And that language has stayed in current debates about Lincoln and the sincerity of his efforts to emancipate the slaves. That meeting is very complicated because the unfortunate language that he used was immediately leaked to the press and made African-American leaders upset. Frederick Douglass was not in that meeting, but he was upset. It is possible that Lincoln was so crafty that he wanted that kind of a meeting and that kind of a leak to happen because he's right at that moment preparing emancipation.

EDWARD WIDMER:

It is possible that with the left hand he's letting out this message of conservatism saying, "I don't think our races can live together," so that the body of centrist whites in the North will relax. He's got elections coming up in the fall of 1862. While with the right hand, he's pushing very aggressively for extreme emancipation. It's possible that he was playing those two games at the same time. It's also possible he was improvising from day-to-day and he had a bad meeting, and anything is possible.

EDWARD WIDMER:

Only a week after that meeting, he writes the famous letter to Horace Greeley saying, "If I could save the Union by freeing no slaves, I would do it. And if I could save the Union by freeing all the slaves, I would do it." That is vintage Lincoln as if those two are equal options, but only one is a real option at that point, and that is freeing all the slaves. But he's softening the public for what's

coming. And I think it is possible that the bad meeting with African-American leaders was part of his strategy of softening the public for a really big act of justice that was coming. Something we remember him quite well for.

Fort Monroe and the 'contraband' policy

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EDWARD WIDMER:

A really important moment came in May, 1861. There hasn't been very much fighting at all, and some African-Americans, nobody knew whether to call them slaves or not at this point, but some young African-Americans presented themselves at Fort Monroe, which is on the James River in Virginia. It's actually the same river in the same place where the first ship in 1619 brought the first enslaved Africans, so by an uncanny coincidence, at the beginning of the Civil War in the same location, some young African-Americans presented themselves to a Union-held fort in the state of Virginia, and the commander of that fort was Benjamin Butler, who was a lawyer as well as a general. And he thought about it, and he thought, "Well, I'm going to call you 'contraband of war,' meaning you can stay here..." And he did that as a favor to them because immediately when it was known that they were there, a Southerner came over and said, "Oh, you have to return them to us. They are our property." And Butler said, "They have ceased to be your property because they are "war contraband." Also, by the way, you have claimed not to be in the United States anymore" – and he said this thing that was deliberately meant to ridicule them – he said, "As soon as you swear loyalty to the U.S., we will be happy to restore your property." He knew they

wouldn't do that. But he had created a very important precedent that any African-Americans now who came into the North would be this new category of "contraband." And that was a word that was used for a year or two. And in fact, thousands did come into the North and many made it to Washington, D.C. The Capitol, which was both a Southern city where slavery had been legal and was legal at the beginning of Lincoln's presidency, now is kind of a refugee center where recently freed – by their own courage – African-Americans were coming in larger and larger numbers and living in kind of refugee camps in the Capitol of the United States. And so their own emancipation came from their hands, and I think we should always remember that.

Lincoln's war powers

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EDWARD WIDMER:

Why does Lincoln become much more interventionist as president, much less respectful of the assumed limits of Constitutional authority? One answer is in a war presidents have to step up. And military necessity was a phrase that allowed a lot of new kinds of presidential actions. Among other things, Congress would just check out for months at a time. Congress would come in and do their thing. They passed some legislation– and actually the early Congress of 1861 and '62 is a pretty interesting Congress because without the South there it's much more progressive and they can suddenly (it's a bit like Lyndon Johnson's great society) they're passing homestead legislation, free public education, a transcontinental railroad. I mean, they're getting a lot

done and it's all very progressive. It's Northern Republicans running the show. But then they all check out for months and Lincoln is left running everything alone. So he's got to improvise.

EDWARD WIDMER:

He's also Commander in Chief, not all of his generals are that obedient to him. So that's another reason he begins to fill up with authority. But also I think there's a rising anger in him, and in his cabinet, and in the U.S. government, and in the U.S. public that the South is outrageous, that they are killing significant numbers of Americans. And all of the deaths could be blamed on the Confederacy for starting the war.

EDWARD WIDMER:

And Jefferson Davis is always attacking Lincoln and the legitimacy of his government. So there's less patience and more feeling that Lincoln's just got to get in there, and be a strong military leader, and a strong political leader to get everything done. He tries all these slow ways to get individual states to emancipate their slaves and they all reject him. So that's when he just says, "Okay, we tried it your way. It didn't work. Now, we're going to try it my way." So it's not like he comes in draconian, but after exhausting all of the more polite ways of getting things done, he realizes he's got to act more swiftly.

The Emancipation Proclamation

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EDWARD WIDMER:

Instead of thinking about gradual compensated emancipation, he suddenly comes up with a completely new idea, much more radical idea, which is uncompensated emancipation throughout the entire South as a military necessity. And he presents it for the first time at his cabinet meeting of July 22nd, 1862. And a lot of his cabinet members are shocked that he's moving suddenly as quickly as he is. It's a drastic measure. And then he presents it as a preliminary notice of emancipation on September 22nd.

EDWARD WIDMER:

A historian has theorized that Lincoln often timed these announcements on the 22nd day of a month because it felt patriotic to Americans. It was the day George Washington was born in February, maybe. But then the real Emancipation Proclamation is issued, as every school child knows, on January 1st, 1863. And so within six months, he'd really sped up the game and arrived at real emancipation for millions of African-Americans in the South.

EDWARD WIDMER:

And it's true, most of them were in a sense behind enemy lines. They were in places controlled by the Confederate states of America, but it was still a very powerful act that gave a strong incentive to the enslaved to escape, or somehow undermine the war effort in the South. It sent a strong signal to England and France that this is now a war of liberation and it united the North, too. The North did not speak with one mind, but it gave them something important and democratic and related to a noble ideal to be fighting for.

EDWARD WIDMER:

And Lincoln had hinted as much, a few times in his careful way. He let the secret out a few times, and I believe he was hinting at it a long time earlier in the final paragraphs of his 1862 Annual Message to Congress, December 1862, it's an incredible document. Lincoln uses a lot of beautiful and significant language at the end of it. Lincoln is always very interesting at the end of a document, and he's a little more poetic. But he's thinking poetic thoughts because they relate to the achievement of America's true destiny to become a country that stands for something important.

EDWARD WIDMER:

So he says, "As our case is new, we must think anew. We must disenthrall ourselves and then we will save our country." And "disenthrall" is a fascinating word. It comes from a Norse word for servitude. Thrall is a kind of servitude. And it's almost like a code word for ending slavery. It's right there in the word "disenthrall." And then he says, "By giving freedom to the slave, we assure freedom for the free. We make freedom real for everybody if we all have it." And then he says, "We shall nobly save or meanly lose the last best hope of Earth." These cryptic phrases, but they all come back to his sense that America means something to the world. And either we will live up to what we promised in the moment of our creation, the Declaration of Independence, that we would stand for a code of human rights and treat people decently, or we'd be a nation of hypocrites. You can't be both. And so he's pushing us toward that higher destiny.

Lincoln and Frederick Douglass

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EDWARD WIDMER:

The degree to which Lincoln is paying attention to Black leaders and their shifting opinion of him. It changes a lot, week to week throughout the Civil War. But as he comes in, in 1861, he's not paying a lot of attention to Frederick Douglass, for example. He goes through Rochester, New York, but they have no meeting. He's not really paying a lot of attention to white abolitionist leaders either. And in 1861, he promises in his first inaugural address not to touch slavery where it exists and even promises support for a 13th Amendment that in 1861 meant protecting slavery forever. It later in 1865, there is another 13th Amendment that becomes the real 13th Amendment that abolishes slavery.

EDWARD WIDMER:

So it's a funny situation. There were two 13th Amendments that are the opposite of each other. And Lincoln first supports the bad one. And then he comes around and completely supports the good one. So what's happening in those four years? Well, four years of war is one thing. And as I just mentioned, a rising indignation in the North that we didn't cause this war, the South brought it on all of us and every death in this war is blameable on Jefferson Davis and the tiny circle of white supremacists who forced this horrible civil war on everybody.

EDWARD WIDMER:

But as Lincoln is giving better speeches and approaching emancipation, and then enacting emancipation… And the thing about Abraham Lincoln is he

slow getting there, but once he gets there, he will never back away. And Frederick Douglass understood that. And Douglass is amazed that emancipation happens and is very happy that it happens. Even as it was beginning with the preliminary emancipation, he was skeptical. And he didn't like the language at first, nobody likes the language of the Emancipation Proclamation because it's cold and legalistic. And we wish one of his great final paragraphs was added to it. It wouldn't have hurt and it would have helped. But when the fact of the Emancipation Proclamation was clear on the first day of 1863 Douglass was really happy. And Lincoln and Douglas finally meet in August of 1863. They have a very good meeting about recruiting African-Americans into the war effort. And Douglass offers his two sons, pretty significant gesture and they fight. And they like each other in that first meeting.

EDWARD WIDMER:

And then he comes back a year later for a second meeting in 1864. And then has this incredible meeting with him minutes after the second inaugural address. When he comes to the door of the White House, he's barred from entry by a guard and he's mad. Good for him for being mad. And he's talking loudly and word gets to Lincoln. And Lincoln says, "Send for my friend." And Douglass comes in and Lincoln says, "There is my friend, Douglass," and they have this great conversation. "What did you think of my speech?" Douglass said, "Mr. President, that was a sacred effort, a sacred effort."

EDWARD WIDMER:

And Douglass' words about Lincoln continued to be very, very important. He eulogizes him immediately in 1865 after the assassination. And then even more famously at the dedication of the Freedman's Memorial in Lincoln Park in Washington and talks beautifully about Lincoln. There are shades of difference between those two speeches. The first one he's full of love really for Lincoln and gratitude and sorrow at his death. The second one is a little more measured. I mean, some time has gone by and he says, "We African-Americans were the stepchildren of Lincoln." In the first eulogy said, "We were the children." The second one, he says, "The stepchildren." But he says, "Lincoln really did come around. He did what no one had ever done before him and we honor him." And those words are still important.

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EDWARD WIDMER:

What Douglass thought about Abraham Lincoln remains really important in a country that is not at peace with itself about anything, about race relations, civil rights, the meaning of citizenship, the meaning of our history, how to teach it, how to teach it and to whom, who gets to come into this country? Is it truly open to all or only to some? And how does Lincoln, this often conservative sometimes radical, white politician from a slave holding state, how does he fit into this unfinishable story? It's really, it's an ongoing problem and Douglass is very helpful.

EDWARD WIDMER:

Affection is kind of a corny word to use for these two great men, but he is softening that Lincoln is talking to him, man to man. We don't want to leave women out of this equation either, but I think the phrase works for these two

very proud men, each of whom had lifted himself up by his bootstraps. They had known poverty. And they understood each other the more they met with each other and so Douglass appreciated that. I think, I mean, of course we were not in the room. We have the photographs. We do not have what their human interactions were like, but everything I've ever read about Lincoln suggests that he was really quite colorblind in the small social graces that put people at ease. Would you take off your hat to an African-American? Would you shake hands? Would you point to a chair and ask someone to sit down before you sit down? Just forms of courtesy and he was good that way, Lincoln, and he would look you in the eye and he wanted your opinion after he asked you a question.

EDWARD WIDMER:

So I think even that form of personal respect went a long way with Frederick Douglass, who was so proud and so conscious of disrespect. And so when he met with Lincoln, something worked in those meetings. They also talked about their children. Douglass talked about his sons going into the army, and I think Lincoln obviously would have appreciated that. And Lincoln appreciated Douglass' help as a spokesman to tens of thousands of Americans, hundreds of thousands of Americans. And so he was politically quite valuable to Lincoln as well. It wasn't a one-way street. It was a two way street. So each of these meetings got better and Douglass really helped in 1864 to spread the news, I mean, the Emancipation was now over a year old, but as they were heading toward abolishing slavery in the 13th amendment, Douglass is providing help in his way. and among the many tragedies of Lincoln's assassination, it would have been interesting to see how they

worked together during Lincoln's reconstruction and I have to think all of it would have gone a lot better than it did.

EDWARD WIDMER:

I'm so happy we have Lincoln's friendship with Douglass. It really means a lot to both of them. I wish I had found more words from William Johnson about Lincoln and vice versa, but I have not found any. But there are a lot of words from Frederick Douglass about Lincoln, and they're really useful in every way.

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EDWARD WIDMER:

They're useful in expressing Black rage against Lincoln early in the Civil War, when Lincoln appears to be insensitive to their deep concern that slavery be ended or that they be allowed to serve in the Northern army. He's seemingly obtuse on both issues, and Douglass lets him have it. Douglass isn't shy about saying what he thinks. Part of Douglass's genius is that he created a newspaper. He didn't have to wait for anyone to let him speak. He just had his own newspaper. He could say whatever he wanted to, and he did. And he's scathingly critical of Lincoln in 1861 and 1862. But then there's this change of heart and you could say each of them had a change of heart, and that's really important to focus on, because in our country with its divisions today, too few of us are capable of a change of heart. A change of heart is a good thing in religion or in politics, and both Lincoln and Douglass had a change of heart.

EDWARD WIDMER:

And as Lincoln moves first slowly and then swiftly toward emancipation, Douglass is impressed, and he begins to say that. And then they finally meet in person three times in all, and each meeting is better than the one before. The last one is the one that's so moving, in which Lincoln is speaking to a huge crowd from the east front of the Capitol, giving this incredible second inaugural, which may be greater than the Gettysburg Address. It's a tough call. But in it, he issues this shocking indictment of American slavery. It's an important way of saying it, meaning we were all implicated, not just the South, as the real cause of the war, and that the bloodshed may not end until the same amount of blood is shed in this war as was shed in 250 years of human servitude, this terrible sin really, crime, sin, violation of human rights, violation of America's creed, call it all of those things. But Lincoln now is not mincing his words.

EDWARD WIDMER:

He has been cautious for a long time, and he's speaking in Frederick Douglass' language in the second inaugural saying this was America's sin, and now we are going to continue until it has been expiated, until we have atoned for this sin, and Douglass is right there and you get the feeling Lincoln is looking at him. It's almost like he's giving a speech to one person, and then this incredible scene minutes later in the White House where Douglass is prohibited from going into the White House.

EDWARD WIDMER:

Being Frederick Douglass, he starts raising his voice. He doesn't have his newspaper. He's just standing next to the White House, but people hear him and call attention. Someone lets Lincoln know that Frederick Douglass is

outside and Lincoln's like, send him in, and he comes in and Lincoln says, “There's my friend, Douglass”-- not just Frederick Douglass, but my friend. It's about the highest accolade he could have used for his fellow citizen, Frederick Douglass. And asked him what he thought and that's when Douglass says, “Mr. President, that was a sacred effort.”

EDWARD WIDMER:

Sacred is a good word to use because there is a religious feeling in the second inaugural and so they each found the correct words that day, and then for decades to come, Douglass lived a long time. He gave a lot of speeches about Lincoln and I find the full gamut of Douglass' thinking on Lincoln is really helpful. There's the cathartic anger at the beginning of Douglass' career– justified, the change of heart and then the approval, affection, and even astonishment that Lincoln got done as much as he got done in four short years.

Black influence on Lincoln

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EDWARD WIDMER:

I absolutely believe that the individual valor of African-Americans had a strong impact on Lincoln, certainly after the Militia Act of 1862 makes it possible for African Americans to serve. They volunteer in large numbers. They serve in large numbers. They are wounded and killed and they serve with great heroism and skill and effectiveness. They're very important to the Northern war effort. Douglass' own sons go into the war effort. They fight in

some of the toughest fighting of the war, including the assault on Fort Wagner, made famous by the film *Glory*. But they're fighting everywhere. They're serving in every capacity in an army that needs volunteers.

EDWARD WIDMER:

And so Lincoln is grateful to them, and they're also helping him, because they're proving to the larger Northern public all of the arguments Lincoln is making about civil rights, about freedom for all. They are proving that message every single day they are in uniform. And the South, by the way, is doing the opposite, by the terrible cruelty it's inflicting on captured African-American soldiers who should be treated with military courtesy. And instead, they're just executed. It's an outrage. It's a barbarism which Lincoln understands as such and addresses. So, one side is moving much more towards human rights and decency as the war is going on. The other side moving toward torture and barbarism and no standard of human rights of any kind.

EDWARD WIDMER:

But I also think it's important to say, Lincoln had meaningful Black friendships throughout his life. That wasn't understood at first and even during his presidency when very few people knew what a president was really like, because they rarely got to Washington to see him. But Lincoln had been formed during a long upbringing and young adulthood with important friendships with African-Americans. There's a wonderful book, came out in 1942, so well after he died, by an African-American historian based in Washington. It's called *They Knew Lincoln* and it's about all the stories he'd heard from the Black community of Washington about individual kindnesses

performed in both directions by Lincoln toward the Black community of Washington and vice versa.

EDWARD WIDMER:

People he had been friends with back in Springfield, including a really interesting Haitian-American, his nickname was Billy the Barber. His real name was William de Fleurville. He'd grown up free in Haiti, so he wasn't born into slavery. He immigrated to the United States. He made his way to Springfield, where he and Lincoln were friends for decades, so Lincoln already understood the innate capacity of African-Americans. But he had a complex, mostly racist country that he had to navigate on his way to the top of its leadership, so he had to go slowly at times. But I think most of the evidence, the overwhelming majority of the evidence, based on remarks people heard him say in private or his personal friendships, show a 19th century white American who was remarkably color blind in most of his interactions.

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EDWARD WIDMER:

Lincoln is a better leader, in my opinion, if he's receiving signals from a lot of different kinds of Americans, and he's not as good a leader if he's just imposing change from above, almost like he's a religious figure just ordaining a new rule that we all have to follow. And Lincoln was sentient. He understood the way different kinds of Americans felt. He had friendships among African-Americans back in Springfield. There were very interesting friendships within his household, including... I spent a little bit of time

thinking about a young man named William Johnson, who's extremely interesting. He's about as obscure as you can get in this story.

EDWARD WIDMER:

But he's a young man who Lincoln invites to come with him from Illinois, he's on the train. He's the only African American on the train. And comes into Washington and then Lincoln helps him to get a job in the Treasury Department, and they stay in touch. He comes back and sees Lincoln. Neither wrote about it, so we don't know what they said to each other, but he kept coming back to Lincoln to see him, and then when Lincoln went to Gettysburg, he asked William Johnson to come with him. So that feels important to me, and then the significant thing happens in Gettysburg. Lincoln comes down with an illness the day he gives the greatest speech of his life probably, second inaugural maybe.

EDWARD WIDMER:

He comes down with a kind of fever, and who takes care of him? William Johnson. Lincoln gets better. William Johnson comes down with something. It turns out to be smallpox, which suggests maybe that Lincoln had smallpox himself, you know? He might have given the Gettysburg Address and died, which would've changed our history considerably. William Johnson did die, tragically, and Lincoln personally handled the payment of his funeral expenses and the settling of his estate. So that's one really interesting friendship.

EDWARD WIDMER:

Another is Elizabeth Keckley, the seamstress working for Mary Todd Lincoln in the White House, and she's amazing. She later writes a book about the experience, and she had a son who served and was killed in the Northern army before African Americans were even allowed to serve. But he was so brave; he passed for white in order to go into the Northern army and he was accepted and killed. So, we have to open up our definitions in every way. I mean, it's not even that African-Americans began to serve when we think they began. They actually started even earlier, because they passed and got accepted and fought.

The Draft Riots of 1863

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EDWARD WIDMER:

New York has always been restive, from Lincoln's passage through the city in 1861 on the way to Washington to his very difficult relationship with New York's mayor, Fernando Wood, and other New York politicians. It's a city and a state that has a lot of warring factions and strong Democratic party and the Democratic party has a lot of support from Irish American immigrants in particular, and they're being drafted now. So it's no longer a situation as it was in 1861 where volunteers are going into the Union army. There is a draft, and a lot of Irish are feeling the pain of being drafted and leaving their families, and they particularly resent what they perceive to be a war that is bringing up African-Americans to their level and diminishing their economic chances. They have a lot of adversity they're fighting against, too, as they seek... They're very poor. They're trying to make jobs, support their family.

EDWARD WIDMER:

So it's just an eruption of anger in a neighborhood sort of in the middle of the west side of Manhattan in the summer of 1863, and really serious violence. A lot of people die on both sides. It is ultimately put down, but it's a sign that even in a very important Northern city that there are volatile, almost geologic forces coming out of the underground that Lincoln has to pay attention to.

Lincoln navigates complex Northern politics

00:45:35:00

EDWARD WIDMER:

Lincoln has political problems in the North throughout his presidency, even while leading a winning war effort. There are always people to his left and his right who are making things difficult. There are abolitionist leaders who want him to go much, much faster, and he didn't want to do that for fear of losing the border states at the beginning. There are Democrats and people who are called Copperheads who are Northern Democrats who sympathize with the South, who want him to go much slower. And he can never please all of the people, as he says in one of his famous quotations. So he just picks and chooses his moments, with the hindsight of history, we can say pretty successfully. But he's always carefully weighing opinion in Congress when Congress is in session, and public opinion always, and also the opinion of his military leadership. When McClellan is the top general, McClellan opposes his emancipationist tendencies, and lets Lincoln know that. It's one of the many reasons McClellan's really got to go. McClellan's also a Democrat and then

runs against him. You could say that's a validation of our democracy. You could also say it's borderline insubordination. He's in a different role at that moment, but still.

EDWARD WIDMER:

But Lincoln improves his military leadership and he improves his relationship with Congress, gets better and better throughout the war, and as he's getting results, mainly military results, he's also improving his capacity as America's political leader to get through these titanic measures relating to emancipation and then ultimately citizenship. So that's coming closely after emancipation. Will free people of color, whether former slaves or not, will they be able to vote? Will they serve on juries? Will they be allowed to send their children to public schools? All of those questions are coming pretty quickly, and in his final speech on April 11th, 1865, Lincoln drops a pretty significant announcement that he expects some African-American veterans to be given the vote.

EDWARD WIDMER:

And there's a lot of speculation, pretty unanimous, that that's what sent John Wilkes Booth, who was in the audience, over the brink and into the decision to murder and not kidnap Lincoln. He was thinking about a kidnapping probably and then he decided to kill him because Lincoln is now full-on advocating for voting for African Americans.

The untold story: Black soldiers saved the Union

00:48:47:00

EDWARD WIDMER:

I think there was a real problem in our history books for a long time that prioritized presidents first and then the white male advisors gathered around them, cabinet members, senators, and generals of the war effort, and ignored the mass of fighters in the war, but then also ignored the significant help African-Americans were giving to the Northern cause on both sides. So, as soldiers, after 1862 when they do start serving, but also as spies and scouts – Harriet Tubman is a scout – as underminers of the Southern cause, those who were still enslaved could affect the way a crop turned out and how many people could be fed as a result.

EDWARD WIDMER:

So the African-American people understood very well the nature of the cause, and even before Lincoln's election, they were excited that someone was coming in who would finally do something for slavery. One of the best sources I found in my research was a set of interviews done decades later, 1920s and 1930s, with people who had been very young and enslaved in 1860, but they lived into the 1930s, and talked about their memories of that time and said, "We understood the issues. And Lincoln was against slavery and our owners in the South were in favor of it, so we all wanted Lincoln to win and we all wanted the North to win in the war." So we can get at that perspective, we just have to work harder as historians, and it's really important. We're a democratic country so we need democratic history.

Northern military innovation in the Civil War

00:51:01:00

EDWARD WIDMER:

The changes in the accuracy of weapons and the repeatability of a repeating gun, the rapidity of getting the shots off – the North made incredible strides in four years. And Lincoln followed the tech very, very closely. He would ask that inventors bring new kinds of guns into the White House and he would go fire guns. He wanted to know. He was a bit of an inventor himself. He's still the only president who holds a patent for a device to lift a boat up over a shoal in a river. But he liked science and he spoke the language of small town inventors. Maybe not the most educated scientists, but the people who liked to build models in their backyards and make something work a little better. He liked those kinds of people.

EDWARD WIDMER:

And so all of it, the way cannons worked, the way the ironclad vessels like the *Monitor*, the reach of guns, the speed of firing of guns, the supply networks, having factories churning out guns and bullets, getting those guns and bullets to the front lines within days along railroad networks, telegraphing information about troop movements all around. The South had none of that or nothing like the North. And the North was light years ahead of the South and every other country. So it became really important for Europeans to learn from the rapid strides Americans had made just in their military know-how in these four years.

The cruelty of military tactics

00:52:58:00

EDWARD WIDMER:

Well, Sherman's burning of Atlanta and march through Georgia and the Carolinas has been notorious for generations. It's a strong feature of the movie, *Gone With The Wind*, and there's a feeling that Sherman was almost sadistic as he burned family's farms. But first of all, it should be remembered Robert E. Lee was doing basically the same thing in Pennsylvania as he went toward Gettysburg and that this was an existential war; that if Lee had won in Pennsylvania and it was a pretty close call, he was going to circle around and take Washington and that would have ended Lincoln's presidency perhaps, or the United States of America as in the way we understand it as a country that stands for freedom. So this was an all out conflict and all of those farms were sending food supplies to Confederate soldiers in the field. So there was a military justification.

EDWARD WIDMER:

At the same time, there are laws of human military conduct. We don't want crimes committed against civilians. We want military prisons to be humanely run. By the way, the South fails on that score also. So there were plenty of acts of cruelty or illegality on the Southern side and I think Grant and Sherman would have said that Sherman's burning of farms that were supplying food to Southern armies was a legitimate act of war. I would also imagine that acts of cruelty were committed by Northern general officers and privates in all of those places that were unforgettable and unforgivable. An act of cruelty that violates the standards of military conduct feels badly no matter which side is

committing the act and this was a brutal war that led to, we used to think 600,000, now we think about 750,000 dead altogether, so there was plenty of cruelty to go around.

Lincoln's increasing spirituality

00:55:29:00

Edward Widmer:

Well, he never explained it. So all we historians can do is speculate. But one really big source of sadness in his life and a turn toward God was the death of his beloved son, Willy, in February 1862. And I think he wondered a lot why it had happened. He talked to God in his own private way. We don't quite know the words he used. But we do have some incredibly interesting evidence. There are pieces of paper in which– there's one that we usually call it "A Meditation on Divine Will." And Lincoln is writing out these complicated thoughts, some of which make it into the second inaugural address about how human beings are arrogant when they ask God to bless their personal purposes. And in a war, especially, each side just feels that it's completely on the side of right, and the other is completely wrong.

EDWARD WIDMER:

And Lincoln said, "Already, both sides have suffered a lot. Neither side has gotten everything it wanted. So what we need to think now is how can we do God's will? We shouldn't be asking God to do our will. We need to figure out how we can do God's will." He wrote thoughts like that obviously about himself, but in his private remarks that were written down by people who

came to see him, not so much in his writing, but in things people heard him say.

EDWARD WIDMER:

He obviously felt a personal connection. Now it's always important to pause there and say it was not orthodox. He didn't go to church very often. He was not a Bible thumper. He was uncomfortable with excessively pietistic displays of religion. But something really important inside of him was opening up. And I do think he felt he was an instrument of the divine purpose. And just trying to help as many people as possible and bring a terrible war to a hasty end, but in the right way, not in the wrong way.

Lincoln's second inauguration

00:58:01:00

EDWARD WIDMER:

The mood in Washington on March 4th, 1865 is festive. Everyone knows it's a matter of weeks before the rebellion is suppressed or the war is over. You could say it either way. And Lincoln uses the phrase Civil War in the speech, although earlier in the war he didn't want to use that because even that phrase suggests legitimacy for the other side and at the beginning, he preferred to call them rebels. and so a lot of people are coming into Washington to hear what Lincoln has to say. It's been a while since he gave a major speech in public. A couple orations at charity events in late 1864 or remarks to regiments or some pretty interesting speeches to Ohio regiments, but not really since the Gettysburg Address, which is November 19th, 1863,

has Lincoln given a major speech and everyone knows he has to give one on March 4th, 1865, but they feel like history is closing in. So they want to be there.

EDWARD WIDMER:

So farmers, civilians, political employees in the much larger US government than the one he came in to direct four years earlier – they're all there outside the east front of the Capitol. We have photographs. The photographs have become better over four years. So in 1861, you can't see Lincoln. The crowd you can see, but you can't see the person on the lectern. In 1865, he's right there and you can see the people around him, and you can almost put yourself in the scene itself, and many people believe they can see John Wilkes Booth in some of those photographs.

EDWARD WIDMER:

The weather was overcast in the morning, but it becomes sunny right as he begins to speak, incredibly. And there were all kinds of other unusual signs that people noticed at the time. Walt Whitman noticed a tiny little cloud right above Lincoln as he was speaking, and an unusual pattern in the sky that you could see the planets in the middle of the day. It starts at noon and you could look up and see a few planets, including Venus, and Whitman remembered it and later put it into one of his greatest poems, *When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd*, which is this haunting poem about Lincoln's death, that these were all portents of what was coming. Right after the speech, John Burroughs, a naturalist, bird lover, nature lover, who's a good friend of

Whitman's, felt this tremendous wind blowing over the assemblage – felt supernatural to him. So there all these things people are noticing.

EDWARD WIDMER:

But then there's the speech itself, which is a kind of history of the war. It's really, it's almost like the first draft. And Lincoln being the politician he is, understands that it's important to tell the story your own way, and he begins to do that and he stops– he actually… In a way, it's a corrective to himself because he says, "all knew that the slaves were somehow the source of the war." He doesn't say it as a criticism of them, what he's trying to say is that slavery caused this war. And that's a correction because four years earlier, he was going to some length to say that's not at all what we're fighting over, we will protect slavery, we just are fighting against an illegal secession. But now he's saying it really was about slavery. And then that haunting pretty long paragraph in which he talks about the scale of the suffering caused by slavery and the need to redeem that sin and how the suffering of the war has offered that redemption and how we can never understand the ways of God completely, but it does appear that we have gone some distance toward settling this great debt that we owed generations of people who'd been treated so sinfully by earlier Americans.

01:03:00:00

EDWARD WIDMER:

And then it ends– that might've been the end and that's a pretty stark message like something out of the *Old Testament*: you have sinned and now I am punishing you. That's a lot of the *Old Testament* is like that. But then it goes into a language that's a lot like the language of Jesus in the *New*

Testament and says “with malice toward none, with charity for all” – it's all about forgiveness, which is really is the message of Jesus. “Love thy neighbor as thyself.” And the South was the neighbor of the North. Often in towns, Southerners and Northerners lived next door to each other, and as a country, we lived next door to each other. And so Lincoln calls for forgiveness and says a few specific things that are highly important, including calling for aid to be given to the widows of soldiers and to their children.

EDWARD WIDMER:

Which is a way of saying we will need to have benefits for veterans or in case the veteran was killed, for the families of veterans, which will call in to being a huge new federal bureaucracy to administer the payment of veterans benefits, which will continue into the 21st century, actually, because there are young women who married old civil war veterans, and who got their vet checks until very recently, but more importantly, it's even a precedent for the New Deal because Lincoln is saying when people can't take care of themselves, we need the federal government to step in and send checks out to people, and so in the 1930s, people remembered what Lincoln said at the end of the second inaugural and even some other language at the end saying we now will act in a spirit of peace toward all nations.

EDWARD WIDMER:

And that was important because Mexico was in rough shape and had been invaded by France. We were too distracted to stop it from happening. We had once said the Monroe Doctrine means no European powers should interfere in our hemisphere. Well, guess what? France takes over Mexico in the middle of our Civil War and we're too weak and distracted to stop them, but we

might've started to intervene in Central America. We had a huge military at the end of the Civil War. Even Europeans were afraid of the American army, and in fact, they were studying it. The Prussians especially were studying our very rapid advance in military technology, in guns, railroads, artillery, naval vessels and all of these ways Americans had really reinvented modern warfare over four years, and so there was a fear even in Europe that the Americans might come over and start fighting and by saying we will now be at peace with all nations, Lincoln was saying something really important, and in the spirit of George Washington, who also assured peace at the end of his presidency. So for all these reasons, it's a very heavy speech loaded with significance for the 20th and 21st centuries as well as the 19th.

Lincoln's 1865 "Free as Air" speech in Richmond

01:06:43:00

EDWARD WIDMER:

Richmond falls in the first couple of days of April and on April 4th, the news is official – it has fallen and it's incredibly symbolic. It's the second capital of the Confederacy, but it's where Jefferson Davis has his house and his office. And Lincoln says, "I want to go there." And this is really a kind of logistical nightmare to get Lincoln into a war zone. It's just fallen that day. It's still on fire. Parts of Richmond are burning from the shelling and he wants to get in there, but who's going to say no to Abraham Lincoln he's the Commander in Chief? So this eerie movement of boats begins.

EDWARD WIDMER:

So the James River very wide at the mouth at Hampton Roads, Newport News, Virginia, place where we still have huge Naval bases. It gets narrower and narrower upstream, and really becomes quite narrow In Richmond. So we can imagine as his vessel, his increasingly small vessels … He's getting off big ones to get onto smaller ones that they're feeling pretty hemmed in.

And finally he gets out and it's really dangerous. There are still people who were in the Confederate Army a day before, or who are family members of Confederates walking around, but there are also African Americans right there on the river bank. And as he gets out, they begin to figure out who he is. And they gather around him and the accounts, there aren't that many of them, and they are not entirely consistent, but probably about 40, which is a real number. So let's say 40 people gather around him and he is moved by them and they are thanking him, and some are sort of bowing down toward him, which gets into the way we now talk about the Freedman's statue in Lincoln Park in Washington.

EDWARD WIDMER:

He says, "Don't do that. I don't want you to bow down toward me. You are free." And then he gives this extemporaneous speech that I find one of the most beautiful speeches he ever gave. It's not listed among his official speeches to my amazement. So one of the all time great Lincoln speeches is not listed with the official speeches, but it was transcribed in a couple of different ways. A journalist wrote a version of it, not too long after that day. 20 years later, the Admiral who was with him, David Porter, wrote a really good account of the speech, that is the version I used in my book.

EDWARD WIDMER:

Other historians might want to add a note of caution because we're relying on different individual accounts. They were written down at different times, from different perspectives. There's an African American soldier, named JJ Hill, who's there, who doesn't include all of the same details as Admiral Porter. There are journalists who added in their own perspectives later. And with a lot of these stories, we have to especially be careful against– Lincoln became so famous after his death that people wanted to tell any story they could about Lincoln, especially one that tugged on the heartstrings, because it might sell a lot of copies of a book. So those are all reasons for caution. But my reading of these various sources is they are pretty close to each other. And Admiral Porter is not someone who's going to make up a story to enhance his own reputation. His reputation was secure. He was a very well known Naval officer of the winning side in the Civil War. And his book has many anecdotes and the others are verifiable. So I see no reason to distrust this one.

01:11:07:00

EDWARD WIDMER:

And it includes these beautiful words that sound to me like Lincoln, "You are as free as air." What a compelling image that is, "Liberty is your birthright." Birthright's an important word – means you were born with it, means anyone born in America, Black or White, or now we might say children of “illegal” immigrants, they're born in America. They are citizens by their birthright, by the 14th Amendment to the Constitution. And so typically Lincoln is using sort of beautiful language, but it's language freighted with legal significance that, "You own your own rights. We didn't even give them to you. You always had them, but now you really can enjoy them because we have fought this

war and you can enjoy them without intimidation. You are as free as air." And then there were a few extra sentences which were very interesting. "Study the laws and live by them, really enter into full citizenship. Do not dissipate your freedom with excessive celebration, but live productive lives and go forth free Americans." And I don't want to paraphrase something I can't remember perfectly, but, "You are as free as air and Liberty is your birthright." That sounds to me pretty important, especially a month to the day after the second inaugural and six days before the last speech he ever gave on April 11th from the balcony of the White House, when he said, "Yes, I am going to give the vote to African American soldiers." And as many people understood, both the people against it and the people in favor of it, emancipation was just the first stage of all of the benefits of citizenship that were coming.

EDWARD WIDMER:

So voting– pretty important. We've seen that in every election, including our most recent. And we saw how hard it was in the Civil Rights Movement, just to get to voting again, just to get to 1964 and 1965. 1964, the Civil Rights Act wasn't good enough, we needed the Voting Rights Act a year later to make it possible for all people, regardless of their skin color, to vote in our seemingly democratic country. Service on juries is an important birthright. The right to be educated is an important birthright.

EDWARD WIDMER:

The right to serve in one's military. It's both an obligation your country asks of you, but it is also a birthright. If you want to serve, you should be allowed to serve as so many African-Americans did want to serve at the beginning of

the Civil War. So birthright is a very important word. And if he used it on that riverbank in Richmond with the city still burning, I think it's pretty significant.

EDWARD WIDMER:

And as usual, Lincoln is great with the personal gestures. He'd come up through his own poverty and he just always could relate to others who endured suffering in their own way. And so a story repeated in a couple different sources, including an African-American source, tells the story of, he walked a little further and an old African-American came up to him and doffed his hat. We don't wear hats very often anymore. We forget how important these rituals of courtesy were between equal citizens. And one detail is that the hat was missing a crown. So his white hair was actually sticking up through the center of the hat, but he was proud and he was wearing his hat and he doffed it – that's the word for you take it off and salute someone in the street or in a sidewalk or a lady or children – it's a show of respect between citizens – and Lincoln understood precisely what that meant and took his hat off and not only took it off, but bowed deeply to the fellow citizen who had just shown him a courtesy.

01:16:05:00

EDWARD WIDMER:

So that's a beautiful moment. I wish we had some form of visualizing that because that might be the real end of the Civil War is social equality between people of different standing, maybe, different skin color, definitely, but equally citizens and equally the inheritors of the Declaration of Independence and all of its promises. And that was an important day.

EDWARD WIDMER:

I mean, you could have asked what is Lincoln doing there? He's in a war zone, it's completely unsafe. He should be back at his desk in Washington, directing traffic, answering telegrams. He's right there in this muddy war bank with Richmond burning in a war zone, surrounded by a group of African-Americans. But I think it suggests, and I think it proves what this meant personally to him to end this scourge once and for all, and to tell people it was ending. And so he's right there at ground zero as slavery is ending for a group of Americans. And I think when you think about how hard it was for him to get there, how dangerous it was, how hard it was to even get back. And also that his life was in grave danger, as we know from the fact that it ended 10 days later, it meant something for him to see slavery end in-person.

EDWARD WIDMER:

So as he gives the Free as Air speech on the river bank of Richmond, April 4th, 1865, there is some description of the way it was received. And it basically was jubilation. Jubilation is close to the word jubilee, which was a way the African-American church often talked about freedom that a day of jubilee was coming. And that day had come on April 4th. So the people he was talking to had become free that day by virtue of the military defeat of the Confederate armies defending Richmond. So it was all happening really fast.

EDWARD WIDMER:

And with the North's victory, suddenly freedom comes in right on the heels of the North's victory. And suddenly maybe within an hour of knowing that the North has won, or a few hours, there is the face of the North, Abraham

Lincoln himself, into Richmond. And so he was talking to people who had been freed that day, maybe we're not even fully sure that they had been freed. You couldn't blame them for not entirely trusting promises that had been made to them. But hearing this from Lincoln, that's a pretty authoritative voice from the US government that, "You are now free." Which is what he said.

EDWARD WIDMER:

And the descriptions of the response were cries of joy, shouting of his name, crowding around him, so much happiness, gushing forth out of that small crowd of people– not so small 40 people. And it just sounds like a real breakthrough. And I can't think of another moment like it when Lincoln was in a large group of African-Americans just him and them talking to each other with no filter, it feels really important to me.

National response to Lincoln's murder

01:19:44:00

EDWARD WIDMER:

When news of Lincoln's death went around the country on April 15th, the day he actually died in the morning after being shot on April 14th, the night before, it was astonishing to Americans. The news spread very quickly because the telegraph had become so sophisticated, including reaching California by 1865. And so it was a national crisis. And it was very difficult to process. Everyone had been happy on April 14th. Fort Sumter, which was where the war began, had been returned to the United States on April 14th. The U.S. flag was raised up above it. So the mood was jubilant on April 14th as

Lincoln went to the theater. So it was emotionally really hard to process this sad news the next morning. And it also didn't make sense because the war had been won and Lincoln had won it, and everyone was looking forward to some quieter time and just a chance to rebuild for young men to come back to families.

EDWARD WIDMER:

So it was a hard piece of news to process emotionally, to be happy one day and traumatized the next. Also, no American president had ever been assassinated. They had died in office, but murder wasn't supposed to be a part of the plan of the founding fathers. We were supposed to be a self-governing people who followed the rules. The Constitution is the set of rules, the Declaration of Independence is this upbeat document talking about the kindness and decency and respect human beings owe to each other. So murder doesn't compute very well. But then it was even harder to process and more amazing to people because it came on Good Friday. And suddenly it felt like Americans, who were a very religious people for the most part and a overwhelmingly Christian people at that moment in our history, wondered a lot about the end of Jesus' life. And Lincoln in some ways resembled that life.

EDWARD WIDMER:

So all over America, on Easter Sunday, there were sermons about what it all meant. And it was really confusing and it was even more confusing because Andrew Johnson was now the president and he was not a president people felt confidence in. He was a Southerner, he was not well educated, he was not well-liked in Washington. And immediately it was understood there were going to be hard times ahead for him and for Congress because they were at

loggerheads almost immediately. So it really was a terrible setback. It was a setback for a people who yearned desperately for peace. It was a setback for Americans who felt that their country was once again a role model around the world for something very important. The right of people to govern themselves. And a murder of a president really didn't support that message.

EDWARD WIDMER:

And then there was a growing awareness that Lincoln had been very special. Americans began to read his speeches, all of them, and realized we had a political genius and a literary genius among us. And we didn't always know that. So this huge national bereavement happens, stirred further by the incredible scenes of the train ride back, and then a rapid outpouring of pamphlets, biographies, sentimental images of Lincoln are sent all around the country, and he becomes a kind of saint for a country that is still a little bit insecure about itself.

Lincoln's funeral train

01:23:52:00

EDWARD WIDMER:

So in an eerie way, a train trip back to Springfield is planned carrying Lincoln's body that is very similar to the train trip that brought him in as president-elect. So I described that in a final chapter, an epilogue. It was nearly the same route. It went through Baltimore, which was so hard on the way in, and Philadelphia and New York and upstate New York. At Cleveland it did not go over to Pittsburgh, so that's a difference in the route, but then it

added Chicago near the end of the route after going through Columbus and Cincinnati. It was important to bring Lincoln through Chicago. It was such an important city and important in his life and important in the winning of the war. And also the tomb of Stephen Douglas, his rival, was right there over the train tracks. So for all these reasons an immensely symbolic return trip was planned that brought out literally millions of people grieving in every kind of situation, in very crowded downtown city squares, where they would take the casket off the train and put it in City Hall or in New York or Independence Hall in Philadelphia. And as many as 100,000 mourners would file through over a 24 hour period. I mean, just to think what that meant. More Americans saw Lincoln as a corpse than ever saw him alive. I feel pretty safe in saying that.

EDWARD WIDMER:

But the train went all night in between these downtown stops. And farm families would come out to the tracks where there were no towns and just stand there and see the two lights in the front of the train coming by. And then the interior of the car where Lincoln was lying was illuminated. So they could see him go by and salute him if they wanted or just hold up babies. They brought elderly relatives down in chairs to sit by the tracks so they could all commune in their way with the body and the spirit of Abraham Lincoln.

EDWARD WIDMER:

These slightly strange gingerbread sculptures were built in city after city with black and white bunting. Either the casket would sit before it or on a kind of platform within it, or the people would somehow walk through these

temporary structures, but there's a fascinating architecture of mourning. These black and white candy stripe ribbons that were draped around poles and building after building. And then finally he came home. He had talked about, he used the word home as he came up the Potomac toward Washington from that final visit to the battlefields, and said he was really looking forward to being home again. And he finally was brought home and buried in early May in Springfield in a very moving ceremony. The whole town came out and they all, once again, brought out the mourning crepe, that's the black, the ribbons that men and women would add to their clothing. They even put mourning crepe around Lincoln's horse, Bob, who was still alive. Lincoln had left his horse in Springfield and buried him in the Oak Hill Cemetery in Springfield.

01:27:43:00

EDWARD WIDMER:

And there was a very long list of speakers. Everyone wanted to be on the speaker's platform and people were speaking all over the country at the same time. And finally he was put to rest, except not really. Because Lincoln was so important to Springfield and to America that Springfield dug him out of the ground and re-buried him over and over again. I think something like 14 times before he was finally laid to rest for real. And shockingly, his body was once stolen by gravediggers.

Black abolitionists

01:28:03:00

EDWARD WIDMER:

There were a lot of different kinds of abolitionists, different kinds of white abolitionists, different kinds of Black abolitionists. They were all important though. The Black abolitionists were extremely important in arguing for the cause of emancipation before emancipation, and then continuing to press for all of the basic issues of decent treatment of soldiers in the Union Army or of their families or of their communities after the war. Frederick Douglass was then, and is now, the most famous Black abolitionist, but there were others. You could certainly call Harriet Tubman an abolitionist, although she's not a writer and speaker in the same way Douglass is, but she's an activist to be sure. She's freeing lots of slaves in her native Maryland, where Douglass also was from, and helping them escape along the Underground Railroad to the north, and she's a scout during the war effort. And she's inspiring young women among others to see that they can empower themselves.

EDWARD WIDMER:

I lived in Maryland for a time and it was a great place to study African-American history because there were so many impressive heroes from that part of the world. Small town I lived in on the Eastern shore, called Chestertown, was the home of a minister named Henry Highland Garnet, who was a very impressive leader of Black thought during the Civil War. And he was more active inside the church than Douglass was, but they were both important and really persuaded a lot of white Americans as well as Black Americans that the cause was just. After the war, they all did different things. Douglass goes on to a very distinguished career, including service as our diplomatic representative to Haiti. And that was a great thing in itself because

it showed that an ambassador could be Black. That's a very high ranking position in the U.S. Government. And he served very well. And to the end of his life, he gave inspiration to young African-Americans who wanted to also serve the U.S. Government.

EDWARD WIDMER:

Everyone who had served in the Army had also served the U.S. Government in their own way. And they went back to their communities. There are some very interesting Southern Black communities that formed then, and are still intact. I remember one in Maryland near where I lived, where returning Black veterans might gather their relatives and form a kind of separate village where they would take care of their own people away from what had been a white Southern village. There are even some in Mississippi that are very interesting. There was a lot of Black migration into the north also, including into Washington D.C., which becomes a much bigger and a much Blacker city as a result of the Civil War.

EDWARD WIDMER:

And I argue in my book that that's one of the great lasting achievements of the Civil War is we finally had a national capital worthy of the name. It was just more democratic in every sense. Not every move to the North produced a happy result, in many Northern communities there was as much racism as there had been in the South. So the North had a lot of answering to do also. But in general, anyone who had served in the U.S. Army was entitled to the same benefits and could have a decent chance of starting a new life. And I want to believe that that was the general pattern. We know from the history

books that Reconstruction was deeply disappointing to many African-Americans.

Lost Cause propaganda

01:32:26:00

EDWARD WIDMER:

I think that even though the north won an overwhelming victory on the battlefield, it was unclear who had won for some time after. School books tended to be very obscure about the origins of the war and to be improperly celebrating a reunion of the two sides that wasn't all that happy a reunion in many cases, especially if you were African-American and suffering under Jim Crow. And then in other ways, the formerly Confederate South proved to be extremely skillful at its own propaganda. There were daughters and widows associations and lots of books issued defending the Southern way of life. And then when motion pictures began to be created in the 20th century, they really sort of shockingly defend the "Lost Cause of the Confederacy." D.W. Griffith's movies, *Intolerance*, *Birth of a Nation*, were just blatant pro Southern propaganda. And even well into the 20th century, 1939, you've got *Gone With The Wind*, which is not too far apart from that.

EDWARD WIDMER:

So it took a long time for Americans to realize, which I think they did in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, that there was an imbalance there. That we were not teaching the origins of racial prejudice or injustice very well. And that went past the Civil Rights Movement of the '60s into the

difficulty of creating a holiday in honor of Dr. King. And there was Southern resistance to that for some time. And then ongoing arguments over who gets to vote and under what circumstances, which are still very much present in our political landscape. So in some ways it feels like the Civil War is so far away we can barely remember it. In other ways, it feels like we're still living the same arguments that they were having 160 years ago. So the more we can study this war, including the difficult truths behind it, the happier we will be on the other side.

EDWARD WIDMER:

One part of the Southern propaganda effort was the building of monuments to honor Confederate generals or Jefferson Davis. They're all through the former Confederate South. And in many cases erected in the 19 teens and '20s, the '20s especially. So it's not entirely accurate to say they were built by the veterans and their families. It was a part of a new effort to create a stronger myth of the "Lost Cause." Perhaps because of a feeling it was fading a bit. There were other anxieties in the teens and '20s including over immigration. And very much over African-American rights because World War I ends in 1918, a lot of brave African-American soldiers fight, come back. They don't want to be second class citizens. And yet when they go back to Southern communities that is often exactly what they are asked to become.

01:36:00:00

EDWARD WIDMER:

So the building of those statues in the South was, I think, a kind of reminder to African-Americans and their allies that we in the South do not want racial justice. We want the same old two tiered society that we've always had. So to

defend those statues as some form of original history that goes back to the Civil War is not really accurate. And to hear the voices of the people in pain from having to walk past those statues has become more and more important and more and more honest for the rest of us, whether we are Southerners or not. We are not Northerners trying to tell the South what to do. I am a Northerner. We are fellow Americans trying to all live in a decent country for everyone. There've been a lot of history arguments in the last couple of years, they've included Columbus, who's so far in our past he would have had no idea what the United States of America was. Even Lincoln, whom I have defended, has been attacked in various venues. And his statue has been torn down among the many that were torn down in the last year.

EDWARD WIDMER:

I don't think we want to go too far in the business of tearing down statues. I don't think Lincoln himself would have approved of that. He liked to do things through proper legal channels when he could. And he liked to build up public opinion when he could. He sometimes did things a little bit outside of proper legal channels and public opinion, but in general, he was a slow moving person who believed in consensus and dialogue. So I think the more we can rebuild a consensus that has been missing now for some time, the happier we will be and the more durable our reforms will be. If one side does something violent toward the other, the other side will then just do the same thing back. And each can point to the other side and say, "You did it first."

EDWARD WIDMER:

So I think where we want to go is to talk as one country, nationally, but then also in every community in this country to talk locally. I think that's very

important, is making sure locally that people feel heard. That's where a lot of democracy happens in America. That's where the founders wanted it to happen in local politics, in local schools, in local churches and synagogues and mosques. And just to listen as well as we talk. We're a very good nation of talkers. We're not always a great nation of listeners. So if we can improve on that score a little bit, I think we can have a happy future still.

Lincoln's significance

01:38:59:00

EDWARD WIDMER:

There was a feeling that something nearly as important as the winning of the Civil War had happened – the assassination was another traumatic chapter. First, we had to get through the war, which includes huge chapters within the war, including emancipation and the bestowing of citizenship and the creation of the right legal architecture, including the 13th, 14th amendments, the assassination and then Reconstruction. And how to rebuild a country that had come so close to the edge of its own destruction, and maybe had even gone past the edge.

EDWARD WIDMER:

And it was only through Lincoln's incredible political skill that we'd come back from that edge. And we're able now to rebuild as something better. But for a long time, it was not clear that we were rebuilding as something better. And a pretty bitter argument followed in the late 1860s and the 1870s over what kind of reconstruction we wanted. And we didn't settle that argument

very well. And it took another 100 years to bring in anything, like meaningful civil rights. And once again, a lot of African-American, including children and the elderly, had to stand up and claim those rights for themselves just as they did in the 1860s when they freed themselves, or volunteered for the war effort. But once again, it took African-American leadership to wake up white America, to bring in a more fitting and decent and proper legal architecture to support our claim to being a country that believes in freedom.

EDWARD WIDMER:

And we thought we sealed the deal in 1964 and 1965, and then half a century and more later, it's pretty clear we have some more hard work to do. This an argument that has a way of coming back out into the open just when we think we have solved it. So I'm grateful for the chance to talk again to history lovers, and I hope there are children among them, about the work of all Americans. And talking about history is part of that work. To make us a country that lives up to our ideals. It's one thing to have high ideals, that's good, but if you don't live up to them, then what are you? Lincoln helped us to be a more honest country than we had been, but a lot of problems remained and some even deepened after his death.

EDWARD WIDMER:

I think he's a hero for other generations, that's for other generations to decide. But I see in his story, a deep, moral commitment to making America better. He raised himself up, he worked out his own life, getting through poverty and a lot of hardship and solved his own self first that's maybe where we have to begin. Saw injustice in other ways and began to speak out against it, including when he thought he was retired from politics. That's when his

second life really began. And he was a much more effective politician when he had a righteous anger. Maybe he didn't have enough for everyone at the beginning, but as it turned out, he had a fair amount and he found the right channels and the right timing to really make a lasting difference and to make America America. That's a phrase from Langston Hughes. He said, "America never was America to me, but Lincoln made America America for everyone."

The Freedman's Memorial

01:43:22:00

EDWARD WIDMER:

The Freedman's Memorial is tough and all of these memories are tough right now. They've actually become tougher in the last few years. You think everything would get easier. In fact, they got tougher. And there are so many people I cannot speak for. I cannot speak for any group of Americans who feel the pain of an ancestor who was enslaved. I cannot speak for them. I can only ask for their understanding and to apologize on behalf of whatever group of Americans I represent. And I too am a mixture of some immigrants and some Americans who were here longer.

EDWARD WIDMER:

But the Freedman's Memorial is a really complicated story because it's an unfortunate statue. It looks bad now. The African-American is in an inferior role, kneeling. Lincoln is standing up almost as if he has a magic wand in his hand, but he doesn't. But it just looks bad, and it even looked bad at the time. Frederick Douglass commented that it was not his favorite pose he would

have chosen. But he still went. He still gave the most important speech at the dedication. And a great deal of thought went into that statue from the African-American community. They contributed to it, knowing the design that was coming. A former slave posed. It's a realistic sculpture based on a real slave, a former slave, freedman. They were really trying their best by the light that was available to them in the 1860s and '70s and early 1880s, and they also dedicated a huge park, the statue's in the center of, in the Capitol Hill neighborhood, which is where Frederick Douglass lived at the time. And so I truly believe their intention was good, but it is an unfortunate-looking statue.

EDWARD WIDMER:

There are replicas of that statue in other parts of America, including Boston, where I was born, and there was a movement that succeeded in bringing down that statue in Boston, and I supported that movement because it didn't do anything where it was. It was not in a neighborhood associated with Lincoln or the African-American community, and I thought it was giving some pain to people and it should come down, and it did. In Washington it's harder because it's in the center of a park named after Lincoln, and there was this famous dedication by Frederick Douglass with a huge number of African-Americans there.

EDWARD WIDMER:

So, I support a recommendation that Douglass's biographer, David Blight, made, which is that we should keep the statue, but contextualize it. And let's put up lots of other statues all around. Certainly, the biggest one should be to Frederick Douglass, I think, but then how about a few statues to the women who endured so much trauma during the Civil War? The women of the North,

the women of the South, African-American women, and Native Americans, and let's get committees from the neighborhood, committees from around the country to think about how to make a new set of messages in Lincoln Park. It's actually a very beautiful park that most tourists don't go to, but it is in the middle of a great neighborhood not too far from the Capitol and the Supreme Court. So let's reclaim that neighborhood in a really creative new way, and put new markers and new statues around that statue.

Lincoln being known as the "Great Emancipator"

01:47:52:00

EDWARD WIDMER:

There's evidence on both sides from Lincoln about whether he was to be remembered as "the emancipator" or not. Right away in 2021, it has an uncomfortable feel– "the Great Emancipator." We are uncomfortable all over the country with the idea of saviors, especially white male saviors. It just feels hollow after so much injustice. Through Black Lives Matter, Me Too, a lot of awareness of the cruelty inflicted upon Native Americans. You name it. And it's not a phrase Lincoln asked to be applied to himself. And we can do better as historians, beginning with the recognition that Emancipation began with the emancipated, that from the beginning of the Civil War, slaves were ending their own slavery by leaving, by running away, and making it to Northern lines.

EDWARD WIDMER:

In fact, nobody was stopping them. If they were stopped, they were in trouble, but if they could make it, they could get into a kind of freedom. Now, what freedom meant wasn't even really understood, and in different parts of the North, different things happened.

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