SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL
LINCOLN'S DILEMMA
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

Sidney Blumenthal Interview
12-07-2020
Interviewed by Jackie Olive & Barak Goodman
Total Running Time: 01:40:49

START TC: 00:00:00:00

CREW MEMBER:

Sydney Blumenthal interview, take one. Marker. Just give us a second to clear Barak, and it's all yours.

BARAK:

Okay.

Political turmoil in the 1850s

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SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

There had been two political parties for quite a while, the Whig Party and the Democratic Party. And then with the Compromise of 1850, which seemed to resolve the question of the Mexican session, the territory gained from the Mexican War, slavery appeared to be off the radar screen of national politics. Although it was very much a controversial subject in the culture because that's after all, when Uncle Tom's Cabin, the best-selling book of the time was published, very much about slavery. But Stephen A Douglas, a person of consummate ambition, Senator from Illinois, wants to be president. He is young. He's in a party that is a Southern dominated party. He is from Illinois. He has been, as Lincoln said, "a Colossus in his life", although he's known as

the little giant. And he has an idea that he can be elected on the basis of a great national project, a transcontinental railroad.

SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

He has by engineering the 1850 Compromise, legislatively showing great skill on the floor of the Senate, also then passed the Illinois Central Railroad Act, establishing the basis for federal support for railroads in the railroad boom. And the Illinois central, which went from Chicago all the way down to Mobile, was the Mississippi River on rails. He had an idea he could build a railroad from Chicago to California, but there was a problem. There was territory in the middle that had not been federally determined what it would be. It was Indian territory, Native American territory, and it had to be organized. And this was Kansas-Nebraska. And this threw Douglas into intense negotiations with the Congress dominated by the southerners and President Franklin Pierce. And beyond him, the man who was the true acting president of the United States. His secretary of war who controlled him, his Mexican War comrade, Jefferson Davis.

SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

The result is that the lands would be opened. It would not be determined whether they would be slave or free, that would be determined by who settled them and how they determined it. Douglas is a great proposition of popular sovereignty, a watery idea that appeared to be an appeal to democracy, but had no definition. And at the same time, the Missouri Compromise, which had drawn a line across the North and a parallel forbidding slavery North of it, was abolished. And so all of American politics was thrown into turmoil. And the Whig Party, which had been defeated in a landslide in 1852 and disintegrated, had assumed different factions and pieces. And the Democratic Party started fractionalizing as well and splitting into Northern and Southern wings, on the basis of what would be the

Kansas-Nebraska Act, and whether or not this territory would be free or slave.

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SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

And why was that so important? Because it would determine the balance of power politically and economically in the country. And the Southerners were determined to make those states slave states, to maintain a balance against the growing, more prosperous, booming North and maintain their grip on the federal government, both the presidency and the Congress. There was an Alabama Congressman originally from South Carolina named William Lowndes Yancy, who said there were two monuments in Washington. And one of them was to the North and one of them was to the South. And the one to the South was the Capitol because they controlled it. The one to the North, the patent office, because the North was industrializing, and booming and innovative. So the parties broke into pieces. One part of the Whig Party joined with all kinds of random elements to form a new anti-immigrant nativist party, hostile to the new wave of immigration that had come into the country of Irish and Germans as a result of the Irish potato famine and the failed revolution of 1848. So that was- and they had one platform plank and that platform plank was that only native born protestants should hold public office in the United States. It was a very powerful party. The Whig Party really didn't exist.

SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

The Kansas-Nebraska Act sparks the growth of anti-slavery forces and they create parties in different states with different names and different programs, all of them opposed to the Kansas-Nebraska Act.

Lincoln's re-entry into politics

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SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

Lincoln says that when he heard of it, "we ran to the sound of the battle, carrying axes." And he had, of course been in the wilderness for years since his one term in the Congress, riding broken down horses, in the Central Illinois County Circuit with a traveling group of minstrel lawyers and judges, you know, sharing ins together and traveling from courthouse to courthouse. And he said, "I'd almost put politics out of my mind." Maybe. I don't think Lincoln ever put politics out of his mind, but suddenly he was born again. And these party's names took on different implications. One was called the Opposition Party. One was called simply the Anti Nebraska Party.

SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

One party was organized out of a previous radical sect called the Republican Party. At Lincoln's great speech against the Kansas-Nebraska Act, a small group of these radicals had approached him and asked him to come to their meeting for the formation of their party. And he said he had a previous legal engagement in a distant county. And he sort of ran away from them. And in 1856, Lincoln decides he's going to join forces with them. These parties organized state by state. They're not really organized nationally, and what becomes the Republican Party. And for the organizing committee of the Republican Party of Illinois, which takes place on Washington's birthday in Decatur, Illinois in 1856, Lincoln sends a telegram to his law partner, William Henry Herndon, that he will go there. And according to Herndon says, "Radicals and all." It almost breaks up over nativism because some of them, former nativists known as know-nothings, resist a platform plank that is inclusive of immigrants by a German newspaper editor. And the Germans are a very important part of this new party's coalition. And they turned to

Lincoln to resolve it, and Lincoln says, "The answer's in the Declaration of Independence. All men are created equal," and they accept the plank.

The Kansas-Nebraska Act

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SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

Kansas-Nebraska Act exploded American politics. And it basically removed the gravity that had existed before, in which slavery was no longer a national issue. Once slavery was a national issue in American politics, which it now was because whoever would control Kansas, might maintain the balance of power in the country. Then slavery was very much on the agenda. The Southerners believed that because Kansas was adjacent to Missouri and the greatest slave holding counties in Missouri were right next to Kansas, that they would easily take over the state. But in New England, anti-slavery forces organized groups of young men, pilgrims to take the train, hundreds of them to Kansas to become settlers. And they carried with them arms. The Missouri forces were rough and tumble militias. They became led by the political leaders of Missouri, thousands of them rampage through the state. They suppressed votes. They shot the place up. And they were shocked to discover that there were new towns created of free-staters who were armed.

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So what you had was Bleeding Kansas, a mini Civil War that no one had predicted, and that no one seemingly could resolve. And as a result, American politics began to assume a new shape with a new party emerging, and with Lincoln in Illinois, as the leader and the creator of the Illinois Republican Party.

Forming the Republican Party in Illinois

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SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

To begin with, Lincoln had to put together the Republican Party in Illinois, and he had no idea whether he would succeed. He didn't even know who would show up at the first convention. And he was very worried that it would only be radicals and that they would turn off the vast majority of people. You have to remember, Illinois is a state in great ferment and it's changing. And it's changing partly because of the railroad and the growth of the city of Chicago. And in the early part of Lincoln's career, there was really not much of a Northern Illinois as a political factor. Southern Illinois was populated by Kentuckians and it was rather conservative. And so it was a Democratic state, not much of a Whig state, and Lincoln's a Whig. And now it is Northern Illinois that is booming and Chicago is industrializing. By 1860, becomes the greatest railroad hub in the nation.

SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

And so by the 1858 Senate campaign of Lincoln finally facing his lifelong rival, getting the chance to run against him, which he's never had, feeling that Douglas has been like a shooting star above him, ascending to the firmament while he has been earthbound. Now he gets his shot in a changing state, a transformed state. And there are seven debates and the debates take place all over Illinois. Lincoln reaches his high point and many of his most eloquent and detailed statements against slavery and his passionate pleas about the humanity of Black people are delivered in these debates. But there are very conservative parts of the state where debates take place and Lincoln is on the defensive. The other factor we have to remember is senators, while there was a popular election, were not elected by that vote. They were elected by the state legislatures. So he had to go around the state, do this, and keep in mind

always that he was trying to elect Republican, this new party, Republican state legislators.

SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

And they had specific constituencies bound by their districts. And so in the conservative places, he's trying to elect a state legislator who can elect him as a senator to serve a larger goal. And so in some of these places, he makes his most conservative and even, you know, regrettably reactionary statement about Blacks. It's sarcastic, he's making fun of it.

"Amalgamation of the races"

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SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

The other part of that statement goes to the heart of something else involving slavery and the whole debate, which is that there's a sexual side to it. And the Southerners are always claiming that what abolitionists and those against slavery are really for, is what they call amalgamation of the races, sexual mixing of the races. And that Black men want white women and that white men who are abolitionists, lust after Black women. This is thrown in the face of Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts on the floor of the Senate. And it is partly what inspires him to his passionate speech, the crime against Kansas, for which Sumner was clubbed on the floor of the Senate by a Congressman from South Carolina, Preston Brooks, and cited by other Southerners with a gold handle cane, nearly to death.

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Sumner was defenseless sitting at his desk and was beaten so bad he pulled the desk up from the floor. And a lot of it had to do with this sexual undercurrent that was thrown out. And Lincoln in the debate says, "Just

because I am against slavery, doesn't mean I want a Black woman for a wife." He's being sarcastic. And he's throwing this back at the racist campaign filled with invective of Stephen A Douglas, who was running that against him, claiming he is for Negro equality. But Lincoln in the other parts of the state, hits the high notes of his anti-slavery expression, talking about how the pro-slavery people and those who do not believe in the Declaration of Independence, that all men are created equal, that includes Black people, are blowing out the moral lights among us. So the debates lead to Lincoln winning the popular vote, but losing the election because he loses in the legislature.

A fragile Illinois Republican coalition

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SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

Lincoln wants to win. Lincoln always wants to win. Lincoln is a seasoned politician. He has run for office since the age of 22. He's a party politician. He is a partisan. The last thing he is, is unthinking. He is a forensic lawyer. He has spent decades before juries of ordinary people all over the state of Illinois. He knows how people think. He lives among them. He knows how to move people. These are the same people who are the voters. And he knows he has a very difficult coalition that he has to hold together, and that it can only be held together on one plank against the extension of slavery at that moment. And that if it broadens beyond that, it will disintegrate. It will falter and they will lose. And those who want a more radical program, will not realize their aims at all. And the entire enterprise will collapse. And Lincoln has all of this in his hands. He has this in his hands before the presidency and it is a kind of apprenticeship for the presidency.

SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

Lincoln spent a good deal of time trying to draw in all these different constituencies to keep them moving in the right direction. And he also had to make sure that he didn't get ahead of himself, and that the entire process did not fall apart, of losing track of where the voters were so that you lost them. And he was not unaware of the other side and what it was doing. He talked about how Douglas was debauching public opinion. Lincoln was the target and keenly aware, and in the center of campaigns that involve the worst kind of racist demagoguery. And he was very experienced at its uses and subtleties.

Lincoln's view of politics

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SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

Lincoln never thought of politics as unsavory. There were unsavory people in it and he certainly had great experience with them. And some of them had beaten him out for jobs. He had wanted a job after his term as Congressman, a patronage job to be given by the new president, Zachary Taylor. But he lost the job as head of the land registry, to someone who he felt didn't deserve it, hadn't worked for the party, but somehow had corrupted the process, and then wound up hiring all of his relatives and in an act of nepotism. So Lincoln was very familiar with this, but Lincoln saw politics as the essence of the working of democracy. And it was not only a field for personal ambition, but for principle and larger goals. And sometimes there was a tension between it, but the tension was often political, having to do with timing, and the agendas of others, and constituencies pulling at each other and trying to maintain that balance. Lincoln said, "I may be slow, but when I take a step, I don't go back." But the reason he's slow is that he doesn't want to go back and he doesn't want things to fall apart.

Lincoln's path to the Republican Party nomination in 1860

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SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

Lincoln had been in politics his whole life, but he was seen as a fresh face. He was a westerner. He had not been in national politics in a prominent position. And as a result, did not carry baggage that others did. Particularly, the person who was considered the presumptive nominee, who had founded the New York Republican Party and been the long-time leader of the Whig party, William Henry Seward, who was the Senator, who had been the governor, and very much a partisan political boss. And Seward carried a lot of baggage. Some people thought he was corrupt. He was involved in New York politics at every level. He had incurred the enmity of nativists because he had supported the Catholic church in New York. He got on the wrong side of both sides as a consequence of John Brown's Raid at Harpers Ferry, where he was accused of pre-knowledge of it, in a witch hunt with an inquiry conducted by the Senate while he was a Senator, and called as a witness by the chairman of that committee; Senator Mississippi, Jefferson Davis again. And Seward, accused of being too radical, then positioned himself as saying that we're putting all of this behind us and it's all calm.

SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

And as a result, the radicals felt he had somehow sold out too. So the governors of Pennsylvania and the political bosses there, and of Indiana and of other states coming to the convention, wanted to win. And they wanted a different candidate. And here is this fresh face, but who's reliable and does not have all of the hatreds directed against him on the national scale that Seward does. And so they throw their support to Lincoln. Lincoln has an incredible operation at the convention. The Illinois people are completely

underestimated. After all, these are, you know, prairie folk provincials from this distant Western state, except that they are the canniest, shrewdest, most experienced political people around. And they set up an operation in the Tremont Hotel in Chicago, put a banner above it, Illinois Headquarters, and they get to work and they don't sleep for days.

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SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

And by the end, Lincoln, who has sent to telegram to them, "Make no promises under my name,"and as David Davis, his old friend, the judge from the circuit who he would later name to the Supreme Court, says, "Lincoln ain't here." And Lincoln becomes the nominee of the Republican Party and, by that clearly with the split in the Democratic Party into a Southern and Northern wing and the rise of the remnants of the border states, former Whigs and Know Nothing Party with another party, Lincoln is on his road to becoming President.

Lincoln's election as a catalyst for secession

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SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

Lincoln's election was the precipitating factor for secession and the Civil War, his election itself. He was the first anti-slavery man ever elected president. This is a revolutionary change. And even though he did not with the Southerners present, if they had not seceded, control the whole Federal Government, control of the Executive Branch gave him in the eyes of the Southerners, great powers with extensive patronage to limit slavery and to begin to abolish it beginning in the District of Columbia. And that would lead

to the strangling of the slave economy and the slave power. And certainly, and to begin with, its extension into all the territories.

SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

And so Lincoln's election is the precipitating factor and he faces at once this great crisis. The South Carolinians had planned ahead of time to secede. They knew he would be elected and they had choreographed this and they choreographed the word to other Southern States to cooperate beginning with what were called the Gulf States, those states on the Gulf from around South Carolina and going both North to Georgia and West to Texas. And there were great movements for secession in those states. There was a lot of intimidation. These were brutal campaigns. There was a lot of physical coercion, and secession was achieved. There was still a lot of Union sentiment even in the Lower South, but it was suppressed.

SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

And then Lincoln faces immediately as President elect a crisis of what to do about it, with a President in office whose government has been taken over by secessionists who are draining federal resources, including military resources, to this new Confederacy and who himself has made a statement in his message to the country, that there is nothing constitutionally he can do to stop secession. And all of the pressure is put on Lincoln who has no powers yet, has not been sworn in.

Lincoln's transition into the presidency

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SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

The most important thing that Lincoln does during the transition is to resist a compromise that will accept slavery and essentially destroy the Republican

Party as a political entity before he even becomes President. And this is advanced by some border state people who want things to remain as they were and essentially to agree to all of the demands of the Lower South and to emasculate the Federal Government and deprive Lincoln of any powers to deal with it.

SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

And Lincoln, through his representative, Senator Lyman Trumbull, the other Senator from Illinois, says "Do not compromise." And that message was sufficient to prevent that compromise from happening and by that, he preserved his power and prevented the Federal Government from being unable to deal with the crisis of the Slave Power, slavery and secession, and allowed him to become a real president.

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SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

Lincoln in this transition has flexible ideas and he is an old Whig and believes that there are many old Whigs still present in the Upper South, particularly states like Virginia, and he believes he can prevent them from seceding and that there is great Union sentiment there. He hopes to isolate the Lower South led by South Carolina and weaken it and somehow break up this Confederacy before it expands to include the Upper South states.

SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

But there is a problem because, in South Carolina, the Confederate forces there have seized the forts in the Harbor and the Union Garrison on Christmas Eve, under cover of darkness evacuates to a fort that is an island in Charleston Harbor called Fort Sumter. And it is isolated. It needs to be supplied and the crisis then begins over how to supply Fort Sumter and

whether or not it should be surrendered to the Confederacy, and all that bears down on Lincoln.

Fort Sumter

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SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

Lincoln's first inaugural, which we remember today for his uplifting high-minded language about the better angels of our nature, always good to remember, and the mystic chords of memory that unite us as a nation, also always something that we need to remember, was a speech that at the same time was a very strong Union speech, attempted to reassure the Upper South that he would not touch the local institution of slavery with the Federal Government and that they should not secede. So that's a moment in early March, but the crisis of Sumter continues.

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And once he decides that he will supply Sumter, then the Confederacy feels that they cannot maintain that situation. And so, in effect, Lincoln's resolve on Sumter and that he will supply it does not provoke them but they decide that they will start the war and they fire the first shots on Sumter. Lincoln did not want the war to happen. He did not seek the war. And in his second inaugural, as he says, "And the war came." It's a passive construction of the sentence. And it was a decision of the Southern leaders who would then form the Confederate Government and named Jefferson Davis as President. He did not order the Union garrison to fire the first shot, it was fired by the Southerners. And so, the war came.

Interpretations of the Constitution's view of slavery

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SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

Lincoln as President, in dealing with both the war and emancipation, always attempted to operate within the Constitution because that granted his actions legitimacy, and that is what ratified American democracy, as far as Lincoln understood it. There's a deeper debate that has gone on for years among anti-slavery forces. There is basically one group of abolitionists who believe that the Constitution is a pact with the devil, that it is a pro-slavery document and this is the- these are the people around William Lloyd Garrison and others like him who are morally appalled by it and seek purification and shaming and moral suasion.

SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

But anti-slavery politics begins with a different idea and a break with Garrison and a break with this idea about the Constitution, and it's a different view of the Constitution. It says the word slavery doesn't appear in the Constitution, and it doesn't appear there on purpose. It's because the framers did not intend to embed slavery in the Constitution and give it that kind of legitimacy, and that there were other parts of the Constitution that were anti-slavery and that the Congress was given the power to limit slavery by the Constitution.

SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

And that's the kind of Magna Carta for anti-slavery politics that begins with the formation of the Liberty Party that breaks with Garrison in 1840. Salmon Chase, who becomes Lincoln's Secretary of the Treasury, is one of the great formulators of this anti-slavery constitutionalism and develops a formula of Freedom National, Slavery Local, meaning that it does not have constitutional authority behind it. It only has local authority and that the Congress has the ability to limit slavery.

SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

After the Mexican War, which Lincoln famously had early opposed, Lincoln was, as he put it, a proviso man. What does that mean? He was a big supporter of the Wilmot Proviso. It was a proposal advanced to limit slavery in the new territory that had been taken from Mexico, and that was the basis, the Wilmot Proviso, for opposing the extension of slavery beginning with the end of the Mexican War. So Lincoln saw that as very constitutional.

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The Southerners argued that the Constitution gave Congress no right to limit slavery and this argument went on through the 1850s and reached a boiling point with the Dred Scott decision where the Supreme Court Justice Roger Taney issues a decision claiming the framers said that the Constitution did not limit slavery in any way because the Black man had no rights that the white man was bound to respect according to the framers. And that just exploded anti-slavery politics and Lincoln thought long and hard about this. And in the most important speech he gave in his presidential campaign, as it were, launching it at Cooper Union, he goes through the nature of the anti-slavery positions of the framers of the Constitution and its relationship to the Declaration of Independence. And that speech, like many other speeches he gave before he became president, lay out his anti-slavery constitutionalism, and it's on that basis that he enters the White House, and that is the heart of his perspective.

“All men are created equal”

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SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

Lincoln believed that the Constitution was the golden frame of the Declaration of Independence, that that's what was at the center of the Constitution. He regarded it as intrinsic to the Constitution and especially the concept, All Men Are Created Equal.

SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

And he also believed that there was another act that was a part of the Constitution, and he considered it very much a part of the Constitution. That was the Ordinance of 1787 that forbade the extension of slavery into the Northwest Territories and created his own State of Illinois. That was inspired by none other than the slave holding author of the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson, and Lincoln gives a speech in which he says, "All honor to Jefferson." He says, "Yes, he's a slaveholder and we know that, but we also know something else about him and that he has provided this premise on which we can oppose slavery and save democracy. And that is the basis of what we hold to be the essence of our principles – all men are created equal."

The story of the Emancipation Proclamation

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SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

The story of Lincoln and the Emancipation Proclamation is a long, complicated and one of the great stories of the Civil War and American history. At one point after the Emancipation Proclamation had been passed, more than a year later in the summer of 1864, George Thompson, the long-time leader of the British Anti-Slavery Society, the close collaborator and friend of William Lloyd Garrison, comes to Washington and he delivers a speech to the Congress and Lincoln goes. And then Lincoln has him to the

White House and they have a conversation. And Lincoln says to him, "I was under a lot of pressure early on about the Emancipation Proclamation, but let me tell you a kind of parable," he says, "A man has a pear tree in his orchard, and if he forces it to yield the pear too early, it's inedible and it's hard and you can't use it. So you have to wait for it to be ripe."

SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

He says, "It was like that with the Emancipation Proclamation. If I had done it at the wrong time, it would not have withstood the politics and it would have been wiped away. And while I had to withstand the criticism in that period, I also had to be patient, and I was also facing terrible circumstances," as he was even as he was talking to Thompson. And Thompson, who was as close to Garrison as anybody and as much an inspiration to Garrison as anybody, found this completely persuasive as an argument. And by the way, by 1864, so had Garrison who supported Lincoln in his re-election.

Events leading to emancipation

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SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

No one could predict what would happen in the war and things happened by accident, all sorts of things. And the chronology of events is completely unexpected and contingent events are constantly raining down on Lincoln. So one of the first things that happens that opens up the discussion of emancipation is that three slaves show up at Fortress Monroe in Virginia, which is held by Union forces, and the commander there, Benjamin Butler, who is a political general from Massachusetts who had been a Democrat and during the Democratic Convention, not even supported Stephen Douglas but Jefferson Davis for president, finds out that these slaves were being used to build earthworks and do labor for the Confederate forces. And he decides

they should be held by the Union forces and that they are quote "under the historical laws of warfare" – "contraband." If they were human property, now they're other property.

SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

Under the historic rules of law, they were "contraband." And so Butler declared them to be under Union control and to deprive the South of slave labor. But now they weren't slaves. They were not exactly emancipated but they weren't slaves. And this then, from these three men begins to open the entire question of how emancipation might take place and leads to the passage of the first Confiscation Act by the Congress, that the Union Army can confiscate these people and use them in the Union War effort. And in effect, they're declared- they are sort of emancipated, sort of.

Securing the border states

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SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

Now, Lincoln has some qualms about this but the qualms have to do with the utterly tenuous and dangerous political situation especially involving the border states and especially Kentucky and Missouri, and the West is by no means secure militarily. The Confederates have control of a lot of Missouri. They're contending in Kentucky. In Tennessee, they have control of river ways. And it's really not until February of 1862, when a general named Ulysses Grant wins two victories in the West and not until even later at the Battle of Shiloh is the West at all a tenable place. And Missouri is turned into a place of guerrilla warfare and Kentucky is a vicious place all through the war of murders, assassinations, guerrilla gangs and dual governments from the beginning. So Lincoln finally signs the first Confiscation Act. He's worried about keeping Kentucky in the Union. As he says, "I'd like to have God on my

side but I must have Kentucky," because the war would be lost without Kentucky and it could have been. So there's a lot to balance here.

SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

This is a geo-political strategic military necessity to maintain the border states or the war is lost. Period. And Lincoln has to keep them secure. And there are dual governments in Tennessee, Kentucky, and Missouri. There are large Confederate Armies out there. There's a lot of crazy stuff going on. There is a tremendous amount of incompetence on the part of Union commanders. There's very little control. Lincoln is receiving all sorts of information and intelligence from people on the ground on the chaos and violence and uncertainty from these places.

SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

When the first Confiscation Act is passed, Robert Anderson who was the Union Major, a national hero at Fort Sumter, who is from Kentucky sends Lincoln a message saying that a regiment of Kentucky soldiers threw down their arms and went to the Confederate side as a result. So Lincoln is afraid that there will be 50,000 bayonets turned against the United States from Kentucky alone if it's mishandled. So Lincoln is deeply concerned about how to deal with border states that have not seceded, remain within the Union, are still in contention, militarily and politically, and have slavery.

Compensated emancipation

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SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

Compensated emancipation is the dominant form of emancipation as people understand it. It is how emancipation was achieved by Britain in the West

Indies through the great abolitionist movement led by Wilberforce and Clarkson and so on. It was compensated.

SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

Lincoln, as a Congressman, had drawn up with the leading abolitionists of the time in the Congress a proposal for compensated emancipation in the District of Columbia. Never received a single hearing when he was a Congressman, and one of the things that he does before he issues the Emancipation Proclamation is to pass compensated emancipation in the District of Columbia, which is the only Federal territory that the government controls. To this day, it is a holiday in the District of Columbia known as Emancipation Day. So- and slave holders were compensated. Lincoln thought this was a way to deal with the slave problem, particularly in places where it was withering as an economic force, such as Delaware, a slave state, border state.

SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

There were very few slaves relatively in Delaware and he thought that this was a reasonable proposal that could lead to the end of slavery there. Lincoln proposes his compensated emancipation proposal for the border states on March 6th, 1862. It's greeted by abolitionists as if it were the complete emancipation proclamation. Frederick Douglass says, "I never thought I would live to see the day when a president of the United States would be for emancipation like this."

SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

So- and Lincoln had worked behind the scenes to create rallies to pressure him himself on this very matter. He worked through figures like Carl Schurz, the great German American leader who had been his Minister to Spain but who came back and who led what was an emancipation society that he had created in the White House with Lincoln in order to create pressure for this matter. But the border states rejected Lincoln's proposal.

Political timing

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SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

At the same time, Lincoln is facing military quandaries. And without military victories behind emancipation, it's very hard for him to arouse and sustain any public opinion for these proposals because, in many ways they're unpopular to begin with. He's facing not only a lack of control of the military through his general, George B. McClellan, who has essentially from nothing brought into being the Army of the Potomac, and it is felt is loyal to him personally and not to Lincoln, and Lincoln worries about that.

SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

Lincoln worries about the fact that McClellan in the greatest military campaign in possibly world history, bigger than any of Napoleon's campaigns, had put more men in a greater armada on the ground in the Peninsula Campaign and achieved frustration and futility in 1862, and then ended with McClellan presenting Lincoln, who he held in personal contempt, a manifesto against emancipation after having achieved no victory and the idea that he controlled the army and not the President.

SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

So Lincoln is facing immense difficulties by the summer of 1862 and he has to- in order to move forward, he has to achieve a military victory to support emancipation. He has to have control of the West, he has to- because control of the West means control of the western border states and their security within the Union. And he has to maintain control of the capitol itself, always under siege, which means that those border states, which are slave states around the District of Columbia, Maryland, often in a state of violent ferment, and Delaware, and then they bring Virginia, always post threats. So Lincoln

has to see his way through all of these difficulties, not to mention other factors, such as preemptive Emancipation Proclamations issued by military commanders that he had to rescind because they were politically disastrous and constitutionally illegal, as he understood them.

The unexpected scope of the Civil War

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SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

Nobody understands what kind of war the Civil War will be. People had an illusory idea that there might be one great battle early on, and that would determine the outcome. And if the battle was won, the war would end quickly. And the First Battle of Bull Run instantly disabused people of that idea. And Lincoln had to really organize the army, have the army organized. And he was instantly engaged in what was a continental military struggle all the way from Maryland to Virginia and west all the way out through Missouri and south of that and down the Mississippi. And he had to maintain a naval blockade around the entire Southern states and create a vast naval armada.

SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

Lincoln, who was a man of science. The only president to hold a patent, who created the National Academy of Sciences, who had a close relationship with a secretary of the Smithsonian, created the first air force with balloons. He tested military weapons, rapid firing guns himself. He sat on the board and oversaw the creation of the monitor class warships. And Lincoln understood manufacturing, he understood the intricacies of mass production, and he understood the nature of industrial force in warfare. And he had not an intuitive sense of this, he had a literal sense of science, he understood science. And through that, he gradually came to understand what the character of this

war would be. And also came to understand that this had to be a kind of total war that was known as in those times as “hard war.”

General George McClellan

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SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

Lincoln had no idea what McClellan would do in terms of how he treated him or whether or not he would lose the war or frustrate him. Lincoln faced a problem where he didn't have a dominant military commander with great experience. And he found him in McClellan after the chaos of the Battle of Bull Run. McClellan had a publicity machine, but he was also a West Pointer. He knew how to train troops and he had been a favorite of even Jefferson Davis when he was secretary of war. He was young, he was- appeared to be dynamic, and he looked like he could do the job. And Lincoln didn't care if McClellan didn't care for him or what he said about him in private. As Lincoln said later, "I'll hold his horse as long as he'll go into battle." And McClellan did create what was the Union Army, the Army of the Potomac, and he whipped it into shape and it was a beautiful army. McClellan's problem was he really didn't like to see his creation ruined by warfare itself.

SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

So for 1861, basically McClellan is, in the latter part of that year after Bull Run, is creating this army. And then they're in winter quarters. And then he sets out in April in the greatest armada ever created with what amounts to about 150,000 men to land in Virginia and move down the peninsula to supposedly capture Richmond. Except he's fooled by tricks of Confederate commanders who don't have many forces running back and forth. And he's slow, he demands more reinforcements. He gets bad intelligence reports

about the size of the enemy. He feels that Lincoln is somehow stabbing him in the back by demanding that he keep troops back to protect Washington, that Lincoln's not giving him enough support. And in the end, even after the Battle of Malvern Hill, when he defeats Lee and Lee suffers great casualties, he doesn't step forward with his army to move towards Richmond, but instead directs it into quarters on the James River. And then issues a manifesto to Lincoln that is completely political in nature and anti-emancipation.

SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

Lincoln's frustrated. He's patient. He hopes that McClellan will win. He's- gives him every piece of material he can. He's supportive. He does withhold about 30,000 troops for the protection of the District of Columbia. And yet McClellan does have overwhelming force. And he is very well aware that there is even treasonous talk among McClellan's general staff about him and his so-called radical politics. And McClellan himself, while he lacks the skills of a popular politician, is very well connected into democratic party circles, especially in New York, and is very much hostile to Lincoln and the Republican party's aims. Lincoln at one point conducts himself a court martial of the younger brother of McClellan's top aide as a way to kind of crack, and this is later, this tight knit group around McClellan, who is politically hostile to him, and also, as Lincoln sees it, trying to undermine the war effort.

SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

There's concern that McClellan would be willing to lose battles and to discredit possible rivals in the military in order to advance his own position. And that is what happens in the second battle of Bull Run when General Pope, waiting for reinforcements, doesn't receive them from McClellan's people and is routed and suffers a serious defeat. Which- and McClellan is quite glad to defeat this person who has emerged as a potential replacement of him at the head of the Army of the Potomac.

Factions of the Republican Party in the North

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SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

The Republican party itself is fractionalized into different groups within the Congress. And they are conducting oversight and even harassment of Lincoln's role as commander in chief of the military forces after Bull Run through the creation of the committee on the conduct of the war. And they want victories and they want things to happen quickly. And Lincoln is trying to manage the difficult and obstreperous personality of general McClellan among the others and awaiting victories in the west. And there is a great deal of politics in the military itself. There's a lot of military politics with figures undercutting each other, with Lincoln's general in chief of the army, General Halleck wanting Lincoln to sack this general out in the west named Grant and accusing him of alcoholism. There's a lot of backbiting all up and down the line. And that doesn't even get at the domestic politics. And that's beyond the guerrilla warfare and the dual governments of Kentucky and Missouri.

SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

But throughout the North, in the Northern States, there is a very powerful movement that grows up called the Copperhead movement. And that movement of so-called Peace Democrats is very sympathetic to the confederacy and wants to sue for peace. And parts of it are even conspiring with the confederacy. It's leader, Clement Vallandigham of Ohio, a congressman, is in direct contact with the confederate high command. And the New York Daily News is being subsidized by the confederate government. So there are lodges and secret societies. There are attacks by Copperheads in Indiana and Illinois. At points in the war the governors of both Indiana and Illinois have to prorogue the legislatures and not call them into session

because they're anti-war and would not authorize volunteer militia units or expropriations for the war as Copperheads. So there's a tremendous opposition to what Lincoln's doing at every single level. And while we, in retrospect, may think there's just this tension over, you know, when is he going to become the great emancipator? Well, Lincoln has tremendous burdens on him every minute of the day from every single quarter.

Civil War vs. civil liberties

01:08:39:00

SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

The problem with civil liberties under Lincoln begins in Maryland. The first casualties of the Civil War took place in the city of Baltimore when gangs attacked Union soldiers on their way towards the Capitol from Massachusetts. And Maryland was in a state of revolt. Lincoln had to have most of the legislature imprisoned because they were sympathetic to secession. There was widespread terrorism in Maryland, destruction of railroads, bridges, blowing things up, attacking people, killing people. And one of those behind it, he had arrested. And that famous case involving a man named Merryman, it was called Ex Parte Merryman, involved suspension of habeas corpus. Lincoln operated at the very limits of the constitution on that when the Congress was not in session so that it was on his own authority. And the Congress did not come back for months.

SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

And he waited for the Congress to authorize it on its own, which it did. But in the meantime, he himself lifted habeas corpus. And he came into conflict with the Supreme Court, particularly its Chief Justice, Roger Taney of Maryland, pro slavery, the man who had written the Dred Scott decision, and Taney ruled that what Lincoln was doing in Ex Parte Merryman was

unconstitutional and Lincoln simply ignored it. He ignored the Supreme Court justice and his decision. Lincoln's government shut down newspapers. Momentarily, there were newspaper editors who were arrested, imprisoned. When Lincoln got a new secretary of war, Edwin Stanton, a very tightly wound, highly competent manager. Stanton was also very intent in shutting down internal domestic criticism and shut down some newspapers at one point and Lincoln overrode him. But these are, you know, episodes in which freedom of speech was suppressed during the war.

The impact of Lincoln's personal grief

01:11:32:00

SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

Lincoln had to overcome tragedy in his personal life before the war. He had overcome it as a young man, with the death of- beginning as a boy with the death of his mother, then the death of his beloved sister to whom he was very close, Sarah, the death of his sweetheart in Rutledge, then the death of his first son, Edward, which really shakes he and Mary. So he has encountered- death is close to them. And they've seen death in all sorts of forms including pandemics, plagues, cholera, typhoid. Mary's father dies of cholera in a great typhoid pandemic - cholera pandemic.

SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

So he gets to the White House and Tad and Willie catch typhoid, Willie dies, and Lincoln is just racked with grief. Mary is inconsolable. Before this, there are incidents involving the war and involving the death of two people who were quite close to Lincoln that shook him. One was Elmer Ellsworth, a young man who had been a clerk in his office and was a kind of military figure, trained troops and acrobat, close to Lincoln. Lincoln just liked him very much. He was very bemused by him, liked him, thought he was incredibly capable.

SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

And when he saw a Confederate flag flying across the Potomac in Alexandria, he went to the inn to take it down and was shot and killed. And Lincoln was profoundly saddened by this. Ellsworth stood in state in the White House.

And then Edward Baker, who was a Senator from Oregon, but had really been from Illinois and had kind of grown up with Lincoln through all of his Illinois experiences, very close personal friend, had become a political general and was killed at the Battle of Ball's Bluff outside of Washington. And Lincoln was reduced to deep grief by the death of Baker as well. And this is before Willie. So Lincoln understands that the war is very close in loss to him and he does not take the loss of the soldiers or those who he cannot see as something abstract. It's all- this is a deeply empathetic man who feels- who has overcome suffering in his own life from his beginning in order to become who he is and to become an integrated personality. And he's deeply sympathetic to the plight of the soldiers. He signs many pardons of soldiers. He is constantly worried. He is up late at night. He is- he's not racked with guilt, he's racked with a sense of overbearing responsibility for everybody and everything. And it is a terrible burden for him.

"A new birth of freedom" for the Union

01:15:52:00

SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

Lincoln believes that the war has a profound meaning for the nation and for everyone in it. And that becomes his idea of rebirth. The idea of a new birth of freedom is, just that thought is in Christian theology connected to death and resurrection. And Lincoln is not far from that in thinking about this. And it is the country, it is the nation, it is the Union that is being resurrected in a new birth of freedom, giving new life to its enduring principles, but also creating a

new constitution, an expansive constitution on a new basis that he sees being created by the sacrifice of those who have given their lives so that there is meaning in what they do.

SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

By that he means emancipation. And the expansive idea of citizenship and democracy, and the breaking of the slave power of this undemocratic oligarchy. And he sees this not only reserved to the liberation of the slaves, but the liberation of everybody who had been shackled, living in a nation that had been dominated by a slave oligarchy controlling its federal government.

SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

As Lincoln says on more than one occasion to Union units, "I'm here and grew up to occupy this office and you are fighting this war, so that a son of yours may someday do that. An ordinary person may rise." As he said in the beginning of the war, this is a people's contest. This is a contest fought so that the purpose of your government is to lift the burdens off of ordinary people, so that they can realize all of the opportunities. That's a broad, expansive idea of democracy. It is not the idea of living in a slave society, where an oligarchy presides and controls the government at every level.

Lincoln's intellectual pursuits and self-reflection

01:18:58:00

SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

Lincoln is constantly working on himself and questioning his own motives, and working them out. Long after his death, his aides, who he called the boys, John Hay and John Nicolay, in writing their 10 volume biography of Abraham Lincoln, discovered what they called fragments. They were pieces of paper Lincoln left behind over the years in his archives, of his own thoughts, written

for himself. They informed what he said and other things he said, but these were not public documents.

SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

One of them is a whole discussion about the British anti-slavery movement, and Wilberforce and all of the others, and what it meant for them and for others to oppose slavery, and who would be remembered and for what. And how those who never stood up would not, in the end, even though they were written down now, would not. And even though he might never be known if he did the right thing, it would contribute to this greater cause.

SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

So he's always thinking about this. He's working, also, on his mind. He always regrets that he lacked formal education. He writes in one of his two campaign dictated autobiographies, you know, his education, poor. And on the courthouse circuit of Central Illinois, when he was riding around during his wilderness years, his mates who would travel with him would find him up late at night, reading by candlelight, in bed, Euclid's Principles of Geometry.

SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

And why was he doing that? Well, he wasn't trying to pass the SATs. He was trying to learn logic, and he felt himself deficient. And so, what does he do with Euclid? Well, he uses it to understand how to make an argument before a jury and win cases. But he also writes fragments to himself about racial justice and slavery based on Euclid. If A can enslave B because of their skin color, then can they not enslave C, and so on? And he goes through all of these Euclidean ideas involving slavery in order to disprove racial inequality. And he's writing this for himself. So, Lincoln is constantly working on himself and thinking through his ideas in a very public way, but also a private way.

Lincoln's quarrel with faith and Calvinism

01:22:29:00

SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

Lincoln begins by being raised in a primitive Baptist background in the poorest part of Kentucky, in his family. Interestingly enough, his parents went to a kind of isolated emancipationist church. They didn't believe in slavery. Lincoln revolted against the harsh Calvinism of some of these fundamentalist-oriented frontier churches, and how they made ordinary people's lives miserable by condemning them for their supposed personal sins. And he really hated that and revolted against it.

SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

He read French philosophs. He read Thomas Paine's Age of Reason, and other books that were opposed to religion as contrary to reason. And Lincoln, if he had a God as a young man, it was, as he put it, cold reason, as he becomes a lawyer. He has arguments with local preachers, and in fact, in his campaign for Congress, he runs against a preacher. And the campaign against him is that he's an infidel. That's the negative campaign. He doesn't believe in God.

At one point, he had written a paper on why Jesus was not divine, and a friend of his burned it in a fireplace. So, Lincoln goes through great personal tragedies and he thinks through, theologically, what is God's purpose, as I am meeting these trials and tribulations, including the fiery trial of the Civil War and what everyone is going through. And he does not attribute to a God, as he says in the second inaugural, a direct role in controlling events, and does not believe that God is somehow on his side, but that we, on earth, have to act according to the values that we believe in, and somehow set ourselves right with God.

SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

And that's is the great explanation of the theological undergirding of the second inaugural, in which he talks about the judgments of the Lord are righteous all together. And what are those judgments? Those judgments are that slavery is defeated, and that the task masters themselves are put down, and that whatever God wishes, that is what has occurred. And then he cites the judgments of the Lord.

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SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

On a personal level, Lincoln attends different churches, occasionally, with his wife. He never formally joins any particular church himself. He was undoubtedly more engaged in spiritualism than people know about, or give credence to, trying to speak to the dead, which was a widespread quasi-religion in the 19th century, held by tens of millions of people. Mary was involved in it, with mediums and seances, and Lincoln was too, and spoke to these people. Lincoln's religion was deeply private. And one thing that he kept from his youth was not imposing it on others.

SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

And there were two other things about it. One, there was nothing Lincoln had stronger, more passionate feelings about than the use of Christian theology to support slavery. And he read all of the Southern theologians who supported slavery. He cited them and he despised them. He was really merciless in his view of their abuse of Christian doctrine. And this was something that informs his second inaugural. Lincoln is imbued, from his very background and upbringing with Calvinism and he can't escape it. He doesn't really believe in it. He dislikes the way in which ordinary people are cast as sinful by others who claim the authority of God. And yet he deeply understands it. And that idea also permeates his rhetoric.

Lincoln's uncertain re-election

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SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

Lincoln believed that, not only could the war be lost, but that he would not be reelected. In the late summer of 1864, Grant had engaged in his overland campaign, and going through the wilderness at a great human cost, persisted in driving South, unlike other previous generals who after suffering great losses had turned back. And wound up in trenches south of Richmond in a static situation of great frustration, with enormous casualties across the North, feeding discontent with Lincoln and his reelection.

SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

At the same time, Lincoln was facing the rise of the Copperheads to their greatest strength within the Democratic Party, grabbing control of the platform, calling the war a failure. Even as the Democrats were nominating McClellan, the former commander, as his democratic opponent. And among the radicals, a third party effort to nominate John C. Frémont, the former general, the Republican candidate for president in 1856, whom he had dismissed earlier for his preemptive Emancipation Proclamation and other matters, including corruption.

SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

And Fremont is the hero of the radicals, who see Lincoln as a vacillating, halfhearted figure, even after the Emancipation Proclamation, and looking forward to Reconstruction. And there's a third-party effort. So, Lincoln believes he will lose the election. He is told by the greatest political masters of the Republican Party, he's going to lose. He's told by Thurlow Weed, who is the Republican boss of New York, the alter ego of Seward, that he's going to

lose. And he believes that, in the transition, he will acknowledge that he lost, but he will still try and win the war.

SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

And he draws up a plan for it. He writes it on a sheet of paper. He folds it. He glues it. He calls a cabinet meeting. He tells the cabinet secretaries to sign this sheet of paper without reading it. Sign its outside. They all sign their signatures. And then he pockets it. And it says, "I'm going to lose the election, and therefore, I may lose the war, and my successor will likely make peace with the Confederacy. And during this transition, I will do what I can to try and save the Union. And you are pledged to it, by signing it" although they have signed it, sight unseen.

SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

So, there's a cabinet meeting after the election where Lincoln unglues it and reads it. And they all have a laugh. But it was a precarious moment. They did not know that there would come a telegram in early September from General William Tecumseh Sherman, after the battle of Atlanta, saying, "Atlanta is ours and fairly taken," which turned the tide.

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SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

And that was the key moment for Lincoln in his reelection. Sherman had cut off all communications with the press. He hated the press, ever since the Cincinnati papers, early in the war, reported that he had a nervous breakdown and was crazy, and would not allow reporters to travel with him. His brother, John Sherman, was the Senator from Ohio, came to the White House to see Lincoln and said, "Do you know where my brother is?" And Lincoln said, "He's gotten down a rabbit hole, and when he comes up, we'll hear from him." Well, they heard from him, and that turned the tide.

Lincolnian language

01:34:05:00

SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

I like his second annual message to Congress, in which he says, "We must think anew and act anew. We must disenthrall ourselves, and then we shall save our country." He's describing how we must use our reason and our minds and our ideas to attain a new place and apply them to the politics of the time, to utterly transform the situation that we are in. And he does it in true distilled Lincolnian language.

What we learn from Lincoln

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SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

There's so many lessons to be learned from Lincoln's life, including the belief that any poor boy could rise to the highest position. And that must be open and remain open. To the idea of what a democracy is, and what's required to preserve it. That change is essential to maintaining a democracy in every new period. That politics is not necessarily an evil, but an essential part of that democracy. That language is crucial in articulating, not only our interests, but our ideals. And then there is the question of personal responsibility, personal sacrifice, and personal commitment to the nation, and Lincoln gave everything, including his life.

Lincoln teaches us about the American character

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SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

The closer I get to Lincoln, Lincoln gets deeper. Lincoln did not- he was not omniscient. He was not a divine figure. Lincoln himself disliked biographies of great men. His law partner, Herndon, tried to press upon him a biography of Edmund Burke, and he said he wouldn't read it. And he didn't believe these sorts of biographies.

SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

But Lincoln is somebody who is constantly deepening. People talk about this in terms of growth or evolution, and all that's true. And he's also responding to circumstances. And Lincoln, at one point, says, "I've not controlled events. Events have controlled me." Which was true and not true because of who he's saying it to. And he's trying to convince them that they should support the arming of Black soldiers. And those are the events he's talking about, and he's speaking to certain Kentucky political leaders who were opposing the Emancipation Proclamation.

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SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

So, Lincoln's very precise. But what I get from studying Lincoln is a deep sense of Americanness that is irreducible, and that it can be learned in these very different modern times and in every time. And that's what is really enduring about Lincoln. And there are lessons from his biography, despite the fact that he hated biographies of great men.

SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

Lincoln did not believe in class deference, that Lincoln did not believe in superstition. Lincoln believed that every person was equal, that he wished to hear everybody, and that everybody was entitled to a chance. That everybody

must be equal before the law, and Lincoln cared a great deal about the law. And that in the end, justice should be done.

SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

You know, Lincoln's personal life was not always happy. He was highly idiosyncratic. His wife had a case about his distance, and it wasn't just a problem about, you know, her volatility. But Lincoln tells us about the American character that needs to endure, especially through periods of great conflict, violence, and doubt, about whether it can.

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