

Lincoln's Evolution on Slavery Interview Thread Transcript

Mary Francis Berry

Lincoln was a Free Soiler. He was not an abolitionist. And he was not part of the anti-slavery movement, which wanted to abolish slavery in the South, which wanted to abolish it everywhere. I mean, the anti-slavery movement, you can date it all the way back to when the Quakers and the 18th century came out with their big mandate against man stealing, they call it that it was immoral and wrong. And all of the people who mobilized to try to help free slaves or to have them hide them, or when they came to the North and runaways and all that. People who liked John Quincy Adams after he was president ran and got elected to the House of Representatives and kept presenting resolutions to the House of Representatives to end slavery, at least in the District of Columbia. And he did that the entire time, but he was in the House of Representatives.

Lincoln was no William Lloyd Garrison. He was no William Sumner. He was none of these people. He was not an antislavery or abolitionist leader. And he certainly was not Frederick Douglass. So that I think that you, he was a Free Soiler. He believed that Blacks and so far as I can tell were human beings, although he was a great fan of Thomas Jefferson, and it was Thomas Jefferson who wrote notes on the state of Virginia, which came out in 1785, which in fact talks about Blacks being inhuman. There's a whole section there. If you never read it, it makes a terrible bedtime reading about how Blacks are emotional and how Blacks are... don't have the kind of sense that human beings have and all the rest of it. I don't think that Lincoln can by anybody's definition be considered to be an abolitionist or an anti-slavery man in the early 19th century.

Given the number of initiatives that were discussed and taken and the war itself and the behavior of the South and the responses of Lincoln and the Emancipation Proclamation and the debates and the Congress of the United States as time went on, it is clear that the abolition of slavery which was done by the actual 13th Amendment could not have happened without certain people in the Congress of the United States. Thaddeus Stevens, Charles Sumner, all those people in the Congress of the United States who were called Radical Republicans, all of those people who stood forward... Also that Lincoln began to see, he did what I call... he evolved over time. That's the best way to look at him. He was strategic and he moved that... Lincoln saw, and we can see it if we look at the Lincoln monument and read the words down below there, you can see that he's talking about slavery as being a cause of the war by that time. He hadn't talked about slavery being the cause of war. He did that gradually as

time went on and finally, in the end, he sees that it is that they seceded because of slavery – pure and simple.

He's trying to save the Union and they see that he knew that you couldn't go back. There's no way to, once you let the genie out of the bottle, so to speak, Blacks were already in the service. They were already fighting. They weren't going to go back willingly and turn around and say, "Well, okay, we'll just be slaves again," but that was not going to happen in large measure that the disruption, everything had been disrupted. And the question is, where do you go from here? And where do you go from here is you have to find something to offer to the people who have already have self-emancipated themselves or liberated themselves.

And so that abolition was not something that he would oppose. And there was no reason for him to do anything like that because after all the war had saved the Union, he was about saving the Union. He was pressed into circumstances where there was a war, secession and a war, the reality of it, and all of the people who had gotten killed and the refugees and all the horror that had taken place. So it was a reality that had taken place. And so he was very supportive of trying to do something, to acknowledge the freedom that already existed in large measure. But what was he going to do – to put everybody back on the plantations? Now, you're going to be slaves? No, you move on from that reality. And then you try to think through what else you should do. And the real 13th Amendment was the reality that the times call for.

The question of whether the Emancipation Proclamation resulted from a moral conscience on the part of Lincoln is an interesting one. But if you look at the facts and his behavior and everything that he did, and since you can't get inside his head, you can only look at what he did. Everything he did up to the Emancipation Proclamation was done out of necessity and to save the Union. If you start all the way back with, when he told Horace Greeley, the newspaper editor in New York, that if he could save the Union without freeing any slaves he would do. So if he had to free all the slaves, you would do so – but he wanted to save the Union. He was clear about what he wanted to do. He was clear about not wanting slavery to expand out into the areas that were free soil.

He had started that when he was a congressman back in the Congress, when an amendment came up to talk about what about the territory we got from Mexico. Will there be slavery there? And he voted no, not expansionism and keep the Union as time went on. So whether he morally thought that Blacks were human, I think he did. He knew Frederick Douglass was human. He spent a lot of time with him and other Black leaders and Black people in there

as evidence that he didn't accept the notion that they were inhuman. But the idea that he did the Emancipation Proclamation for any other reason, other than what he said in the Emancipation Proclamation, which was, he was doing it out of military necessity. It may have made him feel better morally, he may have thought that morally, this makes sense. But given the manpower shortage that they had, it makes sense that he would do it for the reasons that he stated. And I have no reason to doubt him.

People who believed that we should say Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation out of a sense of morality or a moral consciousness perhaps would feel better about Lincoln and him as the great man and the great president if they could point to that and say, see, now you could argue on the other hand, supposedly Lincoln had decided not to issue the Emancipation Proclamation?

Even if there had been this manpower shortage, which was real. Suppose he said, "I don't really care if there is a manpower shortage, I'm not letting these people be free, no matter what. You have to lose, or we'll have to figure out some way to round them and make them fight or something, whatever it is. But I'm not going to do that." While he could have done it, but given the reality that he was commander in chief and was president and wanted to save the Union and the Union was about to get defeated in his view, if something didn't happen, it makes sense that as a practical man, and he was practical, that he would do this.

And I do not think it diminishes Lincoln at all to say that he saw the practicality of the Emancipation Proclamation and to frame it the way he did and that he didn't say a whole bunch of things about how sorry I am these people are slaves and I should do whatever – the act stands for itself as something that made sense that he did. And I think it adds to his reputation rather than diminishes.

Eric Foner

Lincoln, on the one hand, in the early part of the war, geared policy toward the border states. On the other hand, very early in the fall of 1861, he approached Delaware to begin with – a state with only 1,800 slaves – with a plan for gradual emancipation. And he felt that if the border... His idea was if the border states voluntarily agreed to adopt a plan of emancipation, this would convince the Confederacy that those states were never going to join up, never going to secede, and that maybe it would lead other Confederate states to say, "Well, you know, we're not going to get the border states on our side, so we better maybe try to get a negotiated settlement or figure out how to go back into the Union." And Lincoln hoped that his plan for the border states would also be adopted by maybe one or more Confederate states.

What was this plan? It was a plan that Lincoln had talked about a lot before the Civil War, that he fundamentally borrowed from Henry Clay, his idol, his political idol, the

man he respected in politics more than anyone else. It was for gradual emancipation, not immediate. It might take 20, 30, 40 years. Many of the Northern states had abolished slavery through gradual emancipation decades before, Pennsylvania, New York. That is, they adopted laws that said, "Well, anybody born a slave after X date is going to become free at some age." But that didn't free any slave who was alive right now, right? So it would be a fairly long process. It would be less disruptive to the economy, Lincoln thought.

Second of all, there would be monetary compensation. The federal government would pay owners for the loss of their property in slaves. Slavery was established by state law. It was immoral, but it was a legitimate legal status. It was recognized by the Constitution. And Lincoln felt that this would be another inducement. If they could get payment for their slaves, they would more... the owners in these border states would be more willing to voluntarily agree to this plan.

And third, of course, was colonization. That is to say that the government would encourage, not require, but strongly encourage the emancipated slaves to leave the United States, whether for Africa or Central America, which Lincoln was very interested in, or the Caribbean somewhere. The government would finance this. The government would assist people to leave. And why? Why should they leave? Well, that's a complicated question, but I think in this context, the reason is that the owners in these border states would not accept a plan that would lead to a giant new free Black community being created in their states.

This was always the question, when you talked about abolishing slavery: Well, what is going to happen to these emancipated slaves? Are they going to remain in the United States? Are they going to be citizens? What kind of rights are they going to have, if any? Colonization allowed you, I think Lincoln felt, to have an end run around that question. You don't have to worry about the status of the former slaves if somehow you can convince people they're all going to be sent out of the country.

So that was Lincoln's plan, so to speak. One of the key points here is that this was a plan that required the cooperation of slave owners. You couldn't emancipate the slaves or free slaves without the cooperation of slave owners at this point in the war. So Lincoln, the inducements, and the inducements were gradualism, monetary compensation, and colonization. Of course, the border states said, "No, we are not interested in your plan." None of them adopted this plan, even Delaware. And you know, it basically didn't go anywhere, even though Lincoln promoted it for a year. All the way down to December 1862 in his State of the Union address or annual message to Congress, he promoted one version or another of this plan. He called on Congress to appropriate money, but it never got anywhere off the ground.

Lincoln's thoughts on colonization

The fact that Lincoln promoted this idea of colonization for about 10 years, from the early 1850s until the end of 1862 really, doesn't fit with a lot of people's image of Lincoln. Let's just put it that way. The Great Emancipator. When you read his statements on colonization, people can find it very jarring, but I think you have to take Lincoln at his word. I honestly think Lincoln did believe in this plan.

The thing about colonization is, it is part of a plan for getting rid of slavery. It's part of a plan that assumes that you cannot get rid of slavery unless you get cooperation from slave owners. Colonization is part of the...you know, one of the ways of convincing slave owners that they can see the end of slavery, they can see slavery abolished. The fact is that the vast majority of them, and indeed of white people in the North too, did not want a large new free Black population to be created. And certainly, in those states where Blacks were 30, 40, 50, 60% of the population in the South, emancipating the slaves and leaving them in place would completely change the body politic and the, you know, social structure of those states.

Now, basically, Lincoln got this from Henry Clay, his political idol, who for years and years in Kentucky had been promoting a plan, this plan of emancipation, with no success whatsoever, which Lincoln surely must have realized. But this was... You know, there were times in the 1850s where Lincoln said, you know, "I really have no idea what to do about slavery. I can't see how we're going to end slavery."

In his famous Peoria speech, he starts by saying, "If I had all the power in the world, I wouldn't know what to do. My first impulse," he said, "would be to send them to Africa, their native land. But I would immediately realize that that is impossible. It's impractical. You have millions of Black people here. To ship them all to Africa is impossible. But what?" he said. "Free them and make them our equals? No. A white society would not accept that."

Lincoln is always very cagey on this. He says, "I wouldn't accept that. And even if I would, the majority of the white population would not accept a large new free Black population as equal members of the society. Colonization is the..." In other words, it's racism itself that is Lincoln's argument for colonization.

It's not that Black people are dangerous. Henry Clay used to say, "They're criminals. They're dangerous. If you free them, they're just going to run amok and create havoc." Lincoln never said anything like that. What he fundamentally said is, "Black people are entitled to the rights laid out in the Declaration of Independence: life, liberty, pursuit of happiness. And yet they cannot enjoy them in the United States because of the depth of racism here. They need to be somewhere else where they can really enjoy freedom properly." I'm not trying to defend what Lincoln said. I think it's obviously completely reprehensible to consider that these millions of people

should just be expelled from the land of their birth. And when Lincoln says "back to Africa, their native land," that's not their native land any more. The vast majority of the Black people have been born in the United States. They have no more connection to Africa than Lincoln did to England, where his ancestors came from.

So Lincoln, at this point, couldn't actually conceive of American society as a biracial society of equals. Later on, he moves in that direction. But at this point, all these factors play into Lincoln and his embrace of colonization. Did he really believe it? Yes. You have to assume he believed it. Lincoln didn't just talk about it in speeches. He was a member, he was a manager of the Illinois Colonization Society, which was one of the many groups in the United States trying to promote this idea. Lincoln didn't have to join that group. You could be elected to public office without being a member of the Colonization Society.

But, you know, as I say, I think you have to take Lincoln at his word, both early on in the 1850s where he talks about this, during the first two years of the Civil War where he talks about it, but then you have to add in that he then drops it. With the Emancipation Proclamation, Lincoln moves in a different direction on slavery, a direction in which colonization is no longer part of the plan he's putting forward.

Eric Foner

Fugitive slaves, Lincoln, you know, early on in the 1855 in a famous letter to his friend, Joshua Speed said, you know, "I hate to see them tracked down, but I bite my lip and keep silent," because that is in the Constitution, the return of fugitive slaves. It's one of the things that's holding the country together, so to speak. But I think more important than fugitive slaves during the Civil War is just Lincoln's encounters with significant, intelligent, you know, articulate African Americans. Lincoln didn't know very many Black people before the Civil War. There weren't a heck of a lot of them in Springfield. He had some contact with some; there was a barber who he befriended and who he helped with his taxes and stuff like that. There were Black women who worked in their home, in the Lincolns' home, and he knew about people like Frederick Douglass, but he never met Black abolitionists. He never met the Black churchmen, really. It's during the Civil War that they visit him in the White House. He's the first president who has significant numbers of Black people actually coming to the White House, not as slaves, but as citizens, to talk to the president like any other American has the right to do.

And I think meeting with them, everyone knows he met with Frederick Douglass a couple of times, but you know, Martin Delaney, a group of Black churchmen, a whole series of significant African American men. And, you know, Lincoln is impressed by them. These are impressive people. And I think whatever racial prejudices he had

before the war begin to soften because of his encounter with these very impressive African American people. It's a sign of his openness, and open-mindedness, that he's willing to rethink whatever prejudices he may have grown up with.

Chris Bonner

In the time before Lincoln sort of takes the oath of office the first time, there's a lot of sort of polarizing sentiment in the country about Lincoln. In the South, Lincoln is a figure of terror. Again and again, in the late 1850s and in the early 1860s, Lincoln said that he had no interest in trying to change or eliminate slavery in the places where it already exists. Essentially, he said, "I don't want to touch slavery in the South." One of the things he said, though, was that he hoped that the nation could put slavery on a path to "ultimate extinction." And that phrase really stuck with white Southerners. It was a phrase that to them reflected the idea that they're sort of defining a central social and economic institution was wrong and should end eventually. So part of the context of Lincoln's sort of arrival to the presidency is that he arrives and takes the oath of office over a nation that is broken. Seven states have seceded by the time Lincoln takes office. And this was a preemptive strike on the part of white Southerners. It was a response to their, I think, really irrational fear that Lincoln was dangerous to them.

So before Lincoln is able to even do anything as president, Southerners led by South Carolina have decided to leave the Union. There's an irony to the fact of secession. Lincoln said he didn't want to touch slavery in the South. He also said he didn't think he had the power to touch slavery in the South. The irony is that by seceding from the Union and by going to war, white Southerners allowed Lincoln to exercise his power as commander in chief in time of war to enact policies like the Emancipation Proclamation. And so secession in a way created the context for wartime emancipation. And so it's funny as somebody who thinks the Confederates were not the wisest of political actors.

One of the things that I think is interesting is that at the same time that, at the same time that, and precisely because white Southerners were so anxious about Lincoln's presidency, I think that we can envision enslaved people in the South being excited about the possibilities of a Lincoln presidency. We know that there were really robust networks of information and rumor and ideas being spread among enslaved people in the South. We know that, or I think it's pretty easy to envision a slave owner angrily denouncing Lincoln, and you know, the "Black Republicans," angrily denouncing the possibility of abolition under a Lincoln presidency, and being overheard by an enslaved person who then goes and tells their friends and family and neighbors about this guy, Lincoln, who seems to be the enemy of their owner. And so I think

it makes sense that at the same time that slave owners in the South were really worried and talking anxiously about Lincoln, that enslaved people might come to see him as a potential ally, as a person who they could work alongside to try to make their freedom, to realize their dreams of freedom.

In the early stages of the Civil War, Lincoln was what might be called a racial pessimist. He didn't believe that Black and white Americans could co-exist in freedom in the United States. And so as the war is progressing and at the same time that he is contemplating the policy of emancipation, he invites a group of Black men who were sort of understood as community leaders, to the White House, and essentially tries to persuade them to persuade other Black people to leave the United States. Lincoln said, among other things, to these guys, "But for your race among us, we would not have a war." Essentially what he says is that the problems of the nation are problems of the presence of Black people in that nation.

So it's this really stunning moment when Lincoln revealed that he was governing, in 1861 and 1862, from a perspective of a person who doesn't believe that Black people can really fully belong in the United States. And Black Americans were opposed to colonization, opposed to the idea that they should be forced or urged to leave the United States. They had been for decades. The United States was their native country. And so the Black folks that Lincoln spoke to in 1862 don't really, you know, convince that many people that they should leave the country. Lincoln eventually sort of abandons... He doesn't, like, renounce the idea of colonization, but he does sort of stop talking about it publicly. But I think what's really striking is the shift from Lincoln in 1862 saying, "You know what? I think African Americans should leave the United States," to one of Lincoln's last public speeches in 1865 where he says, "We should really consider ensuring that Black men and especially Black soldiers should be able to vote."

I think that there's a clear evolution of Lincoln's perspective, of Lincoln's feelings from a person who in 1862 doesn't think African Americans belong in the country, to in 1865 wanting to ensure the possibility that African American men can not only belong, but really participate in the governing of the United States. It's a fascinating transformation for him.

Lincoln was and said repeatedly that he was deeply invested in the idea that slavery was wrong. So repeatedly he said that he had this wish that all men everywhere might be free. But I think that it's important to think about how he phrased that and how he sort of conceptualized it, right? He said he hoped that all men might be free or that everyone could be free. But I think that he was anti-slavery, but not at all an abolitionist. And he was very clear about that, that he didn't believe that the federal government had any power to attack or eliminate slavery in places where it already existed. And that he didn't

really have a strong desire to actively work to end slavery where it already existed. I think that he was very clear, especially in the run-up to his election in 1860, very clear that he believed slavery was wrong, but that he did not believe that he, as president, would have the power to end slavery where it existed.

And so I think of Lincoln as an anti-slavery moderate. He fit into this broader trend across the Northern states of people who were opposed to the expansion of slavery. People who didn't want more territories in the West and potentially even in the North to be – or to become – slaveholding states. And so I think that Lincoln was... He was... he was a restrictionist. He believed that slavery should not continue to grow. He believed that slavery was wrong, but he did not want to do the work to actively end slavery until the events of the Civil War sort of brought him to the point of making that choice.

In the summer of 1864, Lincoln and Douglass meet, and Lincoln is really worried about where he stands, and his stakes, or his chances, in the election of 1864. He's concerned that he'll lose the election and that if he does, that all the work that he's been doing for wartime emancipation, that that might be rolled back, or that it might be ended. And so, he talks with Douglass and does what I think is a strange thing, which is to ask Douglass to help him figure out ways to get more enslaved people to run to the Union Army and to seek freedom with the military. He wants to try to free as many people as he can if his time in office is going to run out.

This is important. I think it's a reflection of how deeply invested Lincoln is in trying to help enslaved people get free. It's a real marker of how important that is to him. What's weird about it to me, though, and what's strange about it, is that Black folks have been finding their own way to the Union military since the beginning of the war. Since the spring of 1861, African Americans have known how to get there. And of course, they could use help, they could use more Union troops, you know like, out in the field looking for enslaved people, but it's not as though African Americans hadn't been doing this work on their own.

And so it's kind of... it's sort of asking a question that already has an answer. Just continue to send soldiers out, continue to enact policies that will ensure that these African Americans will actually be free when they make it to the Union lines. Doing those things would have enhanced the work that African Americans had already been doing. And so, Lincoln's asking this question in a way that suggests that he's almost uninformed about what African Americans have been doing to this point.

Part of what Douglass does and says about this is that this revealed to him how deeply invested Lincoln was in emancipation as a policy, that it showed Douglass Lincoln's conviction, Lincoln's serious desire to help African Americans become free. And I think that's a big

transformation for Douglass who earlier in their meetings had said, "Well, Lincoln seems to be free of the prejudice that hinders so many other White Americans," but now he's seeing that Lincoln is a person who was really wanting to do work to help to fight slavery. And so, it's a change in Douglass' sense of who Lincoln was, and I think it's a change in who Lincoln was.

One of the challenges I think of reading Douglass' perceptions of Lincoln is that a lot of what Douglass wrote about Lincoln came from much later, and so he's looking back in the 1870s and 1880s on this person that he was interacting with in the 1860s. And he's looking back fondly because Lincoln was a really significant figure for Black Americans.

One of the things that I think is really interesting about this relationship is that there's a lot of ways in which Lincoln's evolution was exactly what Frederick Douglass was envisioning and calling for in terms of his sort of addresses toward white Americans. So, early in the war Douglass is writing a lot and directly criticizing Lincoln for his reluctance to enlist Black men for his resistance to emancipation as a policy. But more broadly, I think like, when Douglass is saying, "Let Black men serve, and they will prove that they are entitled to equality, that they are deserving of citizenship," and then in 1865, when Lincoln says, "Maybe Black soldiers should have the right to vote," that is like the culmination of Douglass' ideal of what Black military service could be. This person, President Lincoln, who in 1862 thought that African Americans couldn't even really belong in the United States is, in 1865, saying Black men, Black soldiers should have the right to vote. That is exactly what Douglass hoped would happen when Black men served in the war.

And so, I think this is part of their relationship, is the way that Lincoln's evolution was a reflection of, and a response to, the advocacy of people like Douglass and the actions of Black soldiers in the war.

Justene Hill Edwards

Lincoln's ideas about slavery and about race did evolve over his lifetime. He was born in Kentucky, spent most of his early years in Illinois, and he grew up, of course, knowing about slavery, perhaps being in the company of free Blacks, especially in Illinois. But he was in no way an abolitionist. He was not a supporter of completely ending slavery. If anything, we can say that he had anti-slavery sentiments, meaning that he opposed the spread of slavery, perhaps for political reasons. But he was not, for most of his life, of completely abolishing slavery.

His ideas about the equality of Black people, again, really evolved, especially after the Emancipation Proclamation. I think it is important, and we should not underestimate the fact that he did request a private meeting with Frederick Douglass, who in the 1860s, was the most prominent American abolitionist. And so even though he

was not a supporter of complete racial equality, I think we can say that his ideas about race and equality certainly evolved throughout the war.

Let's not forget that Lincoln was a politician, first and foremost, and his goal, especially during the war, was to bring the Confederacy back into the Union fold. And this question of slavery was such a hot button issue, even before his presidency, that Lincoln had a very clear sense of the stakes, of coming out in support of abolishing slavery versus taking a more moderate approach.

Now, that perspective changed with the Emancipation Proclamation. It was a really important political move, but it's also important to remember, it was a military move, it was a military strategy to shift the momentum of the war in favor of the Union. And so even though we might be able to read some kind of moral meaning behind it, by and large, it was a political, but most importantly, it was a military move more than anything else.

Michael Burlingame

Lincoln was quite moved, of course, by the deaths of so many Union soldiers, it was a terrible burden on his conscience if he was responsible, and in the wake of some of these horrific defeats like Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville, Lincoln was deeply depressed because these deaths weighed heavily on his own conscience. And during the summer months, when he was president, he would live in something called the Soldier's Home, which was about three miles from the White House. And it was elevated, it was on a hill and it was cooler than the temperature would be in the White House, but it was also near a bunch of Union graves and near a hospital. So he would see, going back and forth to work and his commute as it were, graves, wounded soldiers, and the like, and they weighed extremely heavily on his conscience.

And as time went by, Lincoln was puzzled. Why this bloodshed was so extensive? Why so many people were being killed on both sides? Why so many widows and orphans were being created? And as the casualties mounted, Lincoln, I think, became more and more reflective of what was all this about. What was the meaning of this war? And I think as he reflected on it, he came to think that this might be, conceivably, could be something that had meaning, that there was some significance in this large loss of life above and beyond just the obvious concerns. And that out of this would come something truly monumental and important. And it wasn't just the preservation of the Union. It wasn't just the vindication of the idea of democracy. It also had to do with the issue that he had cared so deeply about, which was the abolition of slavery, and that somehow, this war, which would lead to the abolition of slavery, which in 1862, he does announce, but that the stakes involved, involved liberation of the slaves, as well as the preservation of the Union and the vindication of democracy.

And that the extent of the death was somehow related to the extent of the crime, that there was some kind of moral equivalence in white people suffering in this terrible war in a way that was commensurate with the suffering that Black people had endured for 250 years as slaves in the United States.

So Lincoln's embrace of emancipation, which he announces to the public in September of 1862, and then embodies in law by a proclamation on January 1st, 1863, the Emancipation Proclamation, is something that Lincoln may well have done much earlier if his own personal wishes had been what he had to consult, because he hated and loathed and despised slavery from the time he was young.

Steven Hahn

When the enslaved people, who made up about 80% of the Black soldiers in the Union Army, at least people who had begun the war in a status of enslavement... It was a very precarious situation. To begin with, African Americans had been excluded from the United States Army and from the state militias, from the founding of the Republic. They were excluded on racial grounds and they were excluded because military service was seen as the basis of citizenship and white Americans did not want Black people to be in a position to make those claims. But one of the great problems was not only the experience of racism in the Union Army, because among other things, they were paid less than one half of what white soldiers were paid. But because of the response of the Confederate rebels, military service, Black soldiers were regarded as slaves in rebellion. Therefore they were subject either to execution or they were subject to re-enslavement. And therefore the stakes for African Americans who served in the Union Army was even more profound than was true for any other soldiers. Even so, they fought with a great ferocity. They fought in ways that enabled the Union Army, that was facing a manpower problem in 1863, to keep its forces in the field and to keep the enormous pressure on the Confederate rebels. So, in many ways, Black soldiers who faced daunting prospects turn the military tide of the war as they did the political tide of the war.

There's no question that Lincoln recognized not only what Black manpower did and what Black courage did because he was... Lincoln was a hands-on commander. I mean, he was watching all the time. I mean, obviously given the limitations of communication compared to what we have, it was slower and he was frustrated, but he knew what was going on. And he recognized who was carrying out his wishes, which was to force the unconditional surrender of the Confederates rather than an armistice, or trying to not inflict that kind of damage. And so he wanted to see those who were pushing in that direction. And it was clear to him that this is actually that this was exactly how

HANDOUT FOUR, LESSON TWO

Black troops understood the meaning of the war: that it had to be fought to the end, it had to be fought to end slavery, because they knew as well as anyone that history can move backwards and that they had to make sure that history moved forward.

And precisely for that reason, I think, when he fashioned his first reconstruction plan, he did it really with a view to end the war as fast as possible. And it's clear he was not taking full account of the Black contribution to how the war would turn out. But certainly after that, in the last months and year of his presidency, it was clear that he was beginning to recognize that African Americans had acted in a way that really changed what the war was going to be about and whether the war could be won. And I think that's why he began to contemplate extending political rights, at least in a limited way. Now, obviously we have no idea what would have happened once the war was over and how he was going to supervise the reconstruction that was already underway. But it certainly suggests an openness that Andrew Johnson did not have, to the possibility of African Americans being part of the body politic of the United States.

I think he felt the debt to African Americans. He recognized the role that they had played. Certainly he had a special relationship with Frederick Douglass, who he admired and listened to, even if he didn't always agree or respond in ways that Douglass would have liked, but Douglass made an impact. It was there. And so I think that he recognized the debt. I don't think he had really developed a way of understanding or devising a way to repay that debt beyond the end of slavery. No. When slavery ended in the United States, it didn't end gradually. I mean, it ended very forcefully, dramatically in one sweep. There was no compensation to the owners, and they were counting on it and they continued to count on it once the war ended. So I think he saw that as part of his deed. When he thought he was going to lose the election of 1864, he was focused on trying to negotiate so that he could make sure that what had been done to overturn slavery wouldn't be rolled back.

So I think there's no question that he was increasing... I mean, he was absolutely committed, once the Emancipation Proclamation came down, to devoting what happened during the war to ending slavery. It had to be ended. And that was part of his first reconstruction plan. If you wanted to be readmitted to the Union, you had to rewrite your constitution and eliminate slavery. That was the sine qua non. After that, I don't think he had developed a plan. I don't think he had envisioned a pathway out. You can make an argument in any one of a number of directions that he was headed that way, or that he had actually reached the limits of what he was prepared to do. And it raises interesting questions about what would have happened if he had not been assassinated. And I know when I'm asked that question, "What would the story be like if Lincoln had lived?" My response is always, "We really don't know, but I feel quite confident that we would think less of him."