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BRYAN STEVENSON
LINCOLN'S DILEMMA
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Bryan Stevenson Interview
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Interviewed by Jackie Olive & Barak Goodman
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CREW MEMBER 1:
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Bryan Stevenson interview. Take one. Marker. Seconds to clear and it's all yours.

Evolution of slavery in the U.S.

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BRYAN STEVENSON:

Enslaved people, enslaved Africans were brought to this continent first by boat. 12 million Africans abducted on the African continent, hundreds of thousands brought to the US, they come into Boston and New Haven and Philadelphia and Baltimore and Richmond and New York City and New Jersey, and then Charleston and New Orleans. And shipbuilding, and the commerce around trafficking of enslaved people, the transatlantic slave trade commerce, is what allowed a lot of these coastal cities to thrive. And you can't really evaluate the evolution of New England, or the evolution of New York city or Philadelphia or Baltimore without understanding the role that human trafficking, that slave trafficking, played. By the time we get to the 18th century and particularly toward the end of the 18th century, these urban communities have evolved in ways where dependence on the transatlantic slave trade is no longer necessary. And because it was always unseemly. I

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mean, it didn't take a lot of critical thinking to know that kidnapping someone, putting them in chains, trafficking them across the globe, and then forcing them to engage in labor was wrong. And as the economic need, the economic benefits from slavery began to recede, you hear talk of a abolition, you see this emerging consciousness. So, by the time we get to the 19th century, the North, New England and the east is prepared to talk more openly about abolition. The train begins to run in that direction, but it's in large part because the economic benefits of slavery are not as critical as they have been. The American South, on the other hand, is just developing. States, like Alabama, didn't become states until 1820. We're just beginning to settle and turn Mississippi and Georgia and Louisiana and Alabama and Tennessee and Arkansas to profitable regions of this country. And the demand for slavery there is quite great.

BRYAN STEVENSON:

And so, with declining value to an enslaved population in the north and northeast, growing value in the South, you see this movement of slavery from the North to the South, the domestic slave trade. And that movement was accelerated by trains, right? And so, while we can think of the train as an engine, a force moving toward emancipation, it was first a force that increased and intensified slavery. I live in Montgomery, Alabama—Montgomery had the first rail station that connected the deep South with the North. And so, thousands of enslaved people were brought here by rail. Trains made trafficking of enslaved people a lot cheaper, which meant that it happened a lot more frequently. And by the 1830s, you saw huge numbers of enslaved people coming to the American South every day.

BRYAN STEVENSON:

Alabama's slave population went from about 20,000 in 1819 to 400,000 in 1860, and that was largely accomplished by the trains. And so, while the trains were moving away from slavery in the North and east, they were

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actually moving toward intensified slavery in the American South. And it was so central to the Southern economy that people were not going to give that up. Lincoln steps into the scene in the midst of that, and while he could go from Illinois to DC and see the splendor of America from a train, these trains were moving in different directions. The Civil War was in many ways, an effort to reckon with the multiple directions, to reconcile them and to try to get the country back on the same pathway toward a country, toward a nation that did not depend on human bondage and enslavement. And that was largely achieved, but it was just the first leg of the journey. And I think that's what many of us are trying to get people in this country to understand. Ending involuntary servitude, ending human bondage, ending forced labor was just the first step.

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BRYAN STEVENSON:

Now getting to these ideologies of white supremacy ending these narratives of racial difference, ending racial hierarchy, that was going to take another century. And even then, we didn't fully achieve that in the 1950s and 60s, we made some adjustments in the law, but we didn't fully achieve that. There are people today, and you see it, who still believe in these ideas of racial hierarchy, these ideas of white supremacy. So, we're still fighting that. I think what happened in the 1950s and sixties was really the second leg of that journey. It was momentous, it was significant. But we're now in the beginning stages of a critically important third leg, and it will take a lot to get people to appreciate that we are still on a journey and that we cannot celebrate freedom, we cannot celebrate equality until we reach the destination. And when you have these disparities that we see throughout America, when one in three Black male babies born in this country is expected to go to jail or prison, when there are disparities in health and education and opportunity and employment, when you don't see a proportionate representation, when people cling to the symbols that those who resisted even going through the

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first leg, and use those symbols as political tools to invoke a better time – when people want to go back to that first place – then we have to recognize we're in a real struggle.

Slavery in America

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BRYAN STEVENSON:

I think that we haven't fully grappled with the institution of slavery, and because we don't have a good understanding of what slavery was and what slavery wasn't, it's hard to evaluate the role of Lincoln, who is credited for ending slavery, but we don't really understand what that means. I think to understand Lincoln, you have to understand how slavery formed in this country in ways that were very distinct from the evolution of slavery in other spaces. So, you have 12 million Black people abducted from the African continent, trafficked, kidnapped, abused, mistreated, distributed throughout the Americas. Most of the enslaved Africans were actually taken to Central and South America, but hundreds of thousands came to this country. In Central and South America, you had more enslaved Africans than you had colonizers who were trying to exploit them for labor. And so the way slavery evolved in those societies was very different. They became people who were enslaved. They were part of communities where you had enslaved people, and that history dates back centuries.

BRYAN STEVENSON:

Something unique happened in America. You had, basically, a majority European community that was enslaving Black people in a different way. And their attitudes were shaped by race, by color, and we made slavery a permanent hereditary status. And so by the time Lincoln comes around, we have a very different relationship to the institution of slavery. There were

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always countries that– there were always societies that had slaves, but America had become a slave society. We had actually created a whole narrative about enslaved people. I often argue that the great evil of American slavery wasn't the involuntary servitude. It wasn't the forced labor. It wasn't the bondage. Those things were horrible, but the real evil of American slavery was the idea that was created to justify enslavement in this country. You had religious people and moral people who didn't want to think of themselves as bad Christians. So they had to create a narrative that Black people aren't as good as white people, that Black people aren't fully human. Black people aren't evolved. Black people can't do this. Black people are less deserving, less worthy. In my mind, that was the true evil of American slavery.

Emancipation does not bring equality

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BRYAN STEVENSON:

Emancipation, which was achieved during the presidency of Abraham Lincoln, really focused on the involuntary servitude. It focused on the forced labor. It did not focus on this narrative of white supremacy that was created to justify enslavement. And because of that, we didn't really deal with the fundamental problem of slavery in America. And this wasn't just Lincoln. It was also a lot of abolitionists. You had a lot of abolitionists that saw the immorality of slavery, but did not recognize or believe in racial equality. They also believed that Black people were less capable than white people, less human, less evolved. And they didn't want to see slavery, but they didn't actually believe in true emancipation, true equality. Because of that, I think, we have the Civil War, and the North wins the Civil War, but the South wins the narrative war. That narrative of racial hierarchy persists. And in that respect, I think people can't just say Lincoln was the “Great Emancipator” and assigned to that moment the freedom of Black people and happily ever after,

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because that's not what happened. And in fact, I've argued that slavery doesn't end in 1865– it just evolves.

BRYAN STEVENSON:

It turned into another era where terrorism and violence and lynching, as you well know, dominates and shapes the lives of Black people. And we're still contending with this ideology, this narrative of racial difference and this ideology of white supremacy. So I think it's a mistake to not understand these underlying problems with the American experience, with American democracy when talking about Lincoln. I think Lincoln should get a lot of credit for being aligned with the people who saw the institution of slavery as immoral, as wrong. And I'm even prepared to say that he was distinct from even some of the abolitionists who saw the immorality of slavery, but believed very strongly in the inequality of Black people. I don't know that I would even put Lincoln in that category. I just think that he was not prepared or even concerned about equality, about justice, about a full experience. I don't think he saw enslaved Black people or Black people as Americans, and that shaped his world view. It is the source of a lot of the criticisms, legitimate criticisms, that I think you can make about Lincoln and where he stood on these issues.

The narrative of racial hierarchy in the U.S.

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BRYAN STEVENSON:

I mean, I just think that the multiple ways that we demonized Blackness in this country, we differentiate it between people who are Black and white in ways that were designed to maintain racial hierarchy have never really been explored. We had a narrative of racial difference from day one, and it's part of the reason why we haven't acknowledged the genocide of indigenous people.

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When Europeans came to this continent, we killed millions of indigenous people, and you couldn't reconcile the famine and the disease and the war and the death and the destruction and the despair of millions of tribal communities that were disrupted by this invasion by Europeans, with this concept of freedom and justice for all. So you had to create a narrative. And the narrative that was created is that indigenous people, native people, they're different, they're racially different. Those Indians are savages. And because they're racially different, the values that we hold dear, equality and justice for all, they don't apply to that population. That then laid the groundwork for the enslavement of African people. And when Black people came, that same narrative was crafted in an even more intense and virulent way because Black people were being enslaved. We said that Black people can't do this, and Black people can't do this. Black people aren't fully human. It was just interesting to me to note that in the state of Maryland, the first enslaved Africans don't get to Maryland until about 1642. And within 20 years, the state of Maryland has actually passed miscegenation laws that make it clear that white people cannot marry, cannot be in relationship with Black people. They were already creating a codified legal status to Blackness that made Black people less worthy, less valuable, something that could not be even loved in the way that we think about marriage and relationship, and that narrative played out throughout this country. And so by the time Lincoln comes into power, we have a very clear idea about the inferiority of Black people.

BRYAN STEVENSON:

We have this very clear idea that Black people are not as good or not as worthy or not as... They're not equal to white people. And it's hard to navigate that unless you understand the wrongness of that and confront it. Being an abolitionist didn't require you to do that. So a lot of abolitionists bought into that same idea, and I think that's what we have never really contended with in this country. We haven't contended with the problem of

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racial hierarchy, of white supremacy and these narratives. And that's because we didn't contend with that. Reconstruction fails. After the Civil War, these commitments to voting rights for Black people and equal protection, all are abandoned because this belief in racial hierarchy is greater than our belief in democracy, greater than our belief in equal justice under the law. And so the court stepped back and let thousands of Black people get beaten and tortured and traumatized and lynched on courthouse lawns. The court stepped back and allowed Black people to be disenfranchised. They allowed Black people to be exploited and abused, and that carries on throughout the 20th century.

BRYAN STEVENSON:

By the time the 1960s come, 1950s come, where courageous Black folks are once again pushing this country to own up to its commitment to democracy, it's a struggle because, for a lot of people, they believe that America is a place that values white people over Black people. That's their belief system. It's the reason why we have segregation. It's the reason why we disenfranchise. And when that's challenged, people get really upset. And we passed the voting rights laws and the civil rights laws, but there was never a reckoning with this basic idea, which was what caused the division during Lincoln's era, that this presumption of dangerousness and guilt that got assigned to Black and Brown people when they came to this continent, it's still here. And because of that, we're still fighting to overcome that presumption. We're still trying to get people to reckon with this legacy of white supremacy, this ideology of white supremacy, these narratives of racial difference. And until we do that, Black and Brown people are going to be menaced by police officers. They're going to be disproportionately victimized in various systems, in health systems, in educational systems. And it's why I think understanding this period in American history, when we thought we were dealing with the issue, needs to be re-evaluated.

American power dynamics

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BRYAN STEVENSON:

Well, I don't think there's any question that power and the absence of any transfer of power is at the heart of the struggle that we continue to wrestle with in this country. You saw progress in Central and South America after emancipation that you did not see in this country because those countries, many of them were majority Black countries where power could shift. And even though they were still colonies for a very long time, ultimately there would be a moment where power shifted. What we don't really think about when we think about emancipation for Black people globally is this question of power. And we need to think about that. In South Africa, after apartheid ends, power shifts. A Black majority takes over. The Germans lost the war, and as a result of that, there's a power shift. And we see so much reckoning with the Holocaust. And we see so much acknowledgement of the Holocaust in that country, largely because there was a shift in power that didn't happen in America. So there was no reckoning with the institution of slavery. In fact, there was the opposite. The perpetrators of slavery, the architects and defenders of slavery, were romanticized, were celebrated, were esteemed. I live in a region today where the landscape is littered with the iconography of Confederate generals and leaders. My state of Alabama, Jefferson Davis's birthday is a state holiday. That was part of an effort to legitimate the nobility of this group of people, who were the perpetrators of enslavement, who resisted any effort at freedom for Black people.

BRYAN STEVENSON:

Yes, you can't understand this history without understanding power. I think part of the challenge with overstating Lincoln's greatness is to not be honest about his management of the power he had. Lincoln didn't want Black people

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to fight for the Union, he just thought it would be too complicated. He knew it would be provocative to Southern enslavers and to the Confederacy. And he also doubted that white Union soldiers wanted to empower Black people in that way. So he said no, not going to do it. It's only when the war necessitated that, that he got to that. If he was really concerned about lifting up, affirming Black humanity and equality, that would have not been a debatable issue. It was, in part, because I think he was trying to manage that.

BRYAN STEVENSON:

He famously, of course, wanted to send enslaved and free Black people back to Africa. And that part, I think it's hard for some people to understand that. Why would Lincoln do, he's going to send Black people? That's because, again, his commitment was to preserve the democracy and he just didn't have a vision of Black people as Americans, as full Americans, despite the fact that by the time he's the president of the United States, most of the enslaved Black population in this country were born in the United States. The transatlantic slave trade ends in 1808, the enslaved people that he encountered, the Black people he encountered were born in this country. They had no knowledge of the African continent. And so, I think reckoning with that is important, and that's at the heart of so much of what needs to be untangled about the legacy of Lincoln.

Lincoln's relevance today

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BRYAN STEVENSON:

I think that we've been in a crisis in this country, a political crisis. We've witnessed unprecedented levels of resistance to democracy in ways that are just unfamiliar to a lot of Americans. Things are really polarized, things are really divided. And it hearkens to the mid-19th century when political

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division threatened the future of this country. And I think the threat to democracy that existed in America when you had states seceding, when you had states leaving the Union, I think, is relevant in this moment when the country seems so divided. And the kind of leadership it takes to overcome that becomes a focus. I think a lot of us are trying to understand what's the kind of leadership we need in America to bridge some of these divides to heal some of these wounds? And so Lincoln becomes relevant because no other American president, probably no other American leader, has spent their career focused on preserving democracy in this country as much as Abraham Lincoln. To the extent that he is credited with preserving the Union, there's a lot to learn and a lot to evaluate. To the extent that the problems that created that eruption, that disconnect, that division are still with us, it's also important to reflect on the ways in which his presidency in that era failed to address these underlying issues, which, I think, are pushing so many of the issues of division that we're seeing today.

Lincoln's limitations

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BRYAN STEVENSON:

I do think it's important that we recognize the limits of Lincoln's leadership, the limits of Lincoln's achievements when it comes to the question of slavery. I think it begins with first recognizing that the emancipation proclamation did not end slavery. It ended slavery in the rebelling states, where there was a military need to get Black people to disrupt Confederate behavior. It did not end slavery in America. And in fact, President Lincoln allowed the border states to continue to enslave people. And that concession says a lot about his willingness to sacrifice emancipation in service of preserving the Union. Like I said, I grew up in the state of Delaware. Delaware was angry at the end of the Civil War when they were told that they were going to have to end

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enslavement, and for that reason, didn't ratify the 13th Amendment until the 20th century, almost until 1900. And you saw some of that in Kentucky, you saw some of that in other border States.

BRYAN STEVENSON:

And so it's a mistake to equate Lincoln's leadership with a primary commitment to ending slavery. It's just not true. Now, I think Lincoln believed that slavery was morally wrong and that's why he could be so eloquent. "If slavery is not wrong, nothing is wrong," right? Very eloquent. But he didn't fundamentally believe that the wrongfulness of that institution meant that Black people were equal, that Black people should be free. He was comfortable paying Black soldiers half of what white soldiers got because that's just the world he grew in. He was comfortable saying to Black people that "You're being selfish. If you stay in this country, you should leave." He never believed that this country was for Black people. And if you believe that someone doesn't belong here, if you believe that their humanity, their quest for prosperity and family and belonging is somehow not sufficient is inferior to other people, then you can't actually be esteemed as an emancipator. You don't actually believe in freedom in the way that most of us want it.

BRYAN STEVENSON:

Like I said my great-grandparents were enslaved. My great-grandfather was enslaved in Caroline County, Virginia. He learned to read while enslaved. He didn't learn to read because he thought it would help him survive slavery. If anything, learning to read made him vulnerable, it might've meant that he got sold or got separated or even killed. He learned to read because he believed that one day he would be free and he wanted to enjoy and to experience what freedom really means. And that meant being able to understand the things around him. That was contrary to the aspirations of Abraham Lincoln. I think he marveled at somebody like Frederick Douglas, who was so eloquent, but

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he didn't actually believe in creating opportunities that would allow a whole generation of people like that.

BRYAN STEVENSON:

And so I think there is a harm in failing to reckon with the shortcomings of Lincoln's leadership on these issues. If we don't know, if we don't talk about the fact that he wanted to basically expel, to deport all of the Black people in this country after the Civil War was over, we don't kind of talk about the fact that he didn't really believe in racial equality in that respect. If he really believed that this country belonged to white people and not Black people, then we're not going to navigate the conversation about what Lincoln represents and who Lincoln is in an honest way.

Lincoln's capacity for change

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BRYAN STEVENSON:

I mean, I do think that he was a model of leadership worthy of study and of praise in that he was willing to learn, willing to see, willing to hear. I mean, that story about him, his first meeting with Frederick Douglass, is an important insight to how much he valued someone who was saying things that were critical but that were true. And when Douglass says we need to work on this unfair treatment of Black soldiers, I think Lincoln took that seriously. He didn't have a response to that. After the 1864 election Douglass went to the inauguration. Lincoln saw him in the crowd. Douglass went to the White House to see him. The people outside the White House said, "No, you can't come in." They were going to keep him out because he's Black, and he eventually gets there. And Lincoln says, "Oh my God, you're here. I value your perspective more than anyone." So his attitude shifts over this four-year time period. And I think he would have evolved more, but for the assassination

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and whether he would have evolved to the point where he could truly be called an emancipator, I don't know, because we didn't see evidence of that. We didn't see evidence of a commitment to now enforcing the rights of emancipated Black people.

BRYAN STEVENSON:

We didn't see that during the Civil War. But I do think Lincoln had humility. And humility is a greatly underrated quality for leaders, leadership. I think humility allows you to hear things, to see things, to consider things that you won't consider or hear or see if you're just so confident that you're right about things. And if there is a takeaway from Lincoln's legacy and leadership that I think we should embrace and extol and lift up, it would be his humility. His willingness to learn, his willingness to reckon with his bad choices, his mistakes, the ways in which he has erred, and I think that virtue is a virtue worthy of reflection.

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BRYAN STEVENSON:

I think there were people in this country that recognize the horrors of slavery and of human bondage and exploitation of human beings without a war. That is when you step back and think about it, kidnapping was a crime, it was a crime during the 19th century. And here we had hundreds of thousands of kidnapped victims who were not just kidnapped, but then forced into labor and bondage and then raped and abused and all of these other horrible things. So it's impossible to not see the wrongfulness of that, to not recognize the wrongfulness of this, even before we get to the war. And so I think it's appropriate to be critical of Lincoln for not being fully mindful of the primacy of ending that institution and a basic human equality even before we get into the war. I think the war intensified the complexity of the debate and when he saw Black people who were contributing and fighting and pushing for their own emancipation, that changed things. But I guess I don't know that you

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need the crucible of war to see basic human truths about human dignity, about human value. I just think too many people were able to get there without that to make that a necessary condition for the evolution that we then see in Lincoln. It's what happens with Lincoln, but I don't believe that it's a requirement.

BRYAN STEVENSON:

Just like today, I don't believe that you should have to see Black people killed by police officers unarmed on the street to persuade others that there are these problems of racial bias and bigotry. We shouldn't have to keep proving these points. We should just be committed to that notion of equality and that some people can get there, and other people can't. For me, it just reinforces the fact that we all ought to be able to get there if we're motivated to do that.

I look at things like gender; there were women in the 19th century that were making the argument that look, we should be able to vote, we should be able to do all of these things. Our sex does not make us inferior, and we've made progress on those issues. So I appreciate the forward step toward progress, I'm not so indifferent to incremental progress that I'm going to just complain about that. But I guess I have a harder time conceding that the war was a necessary condition for a leader's evolution. It may have been necessary for Lincoln, but that would be a disappointment rather than a virtue for me.

The complex relationship between Douglass and Lincoln

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BRYAN STEVENSON:

I think Douglass and Lincoln had a very complex relationship. Douglass endorsed Lincoln in the 1860 election because he saw him as someone who did reject slavery, who expressed moral opposition to slavery, but he knew that the plight of Black people was not Lincoln's priority. And I think he was

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energized by the election, and when the Civil War arrived, wanted Lincoln to affirm the importance of freedom and emancipation for Black people. And he didn't really do that, and so, Douglass criticized Lincoln. And I love the story about how, back in those days, oddly enough, you could actually go to the White House and just say, "I want to see the president". And if you waited long enough, you would get that. And so that's what Douglass does. And eventually he's called in. And they allow him to skip the line and, to his amazement, Lincoln knew who he was, had read one of his speeches, had read one of the speeches where he criticized Lincoln.

BRYAN STEVENSON:

And I think it impressed Douglass that he was treated as an equal, that Lincoln respected him. And that was something that affirmed him. He was there because, after allowing Black soldiers in the fight, they weren't being treated fairly. And Douglass was there to criticize Lincoln and the administration for not giving equal pay to Black soldiers and providing equal benefits to Black soldiers. And I think that kind of, "I appreciate that I have the opportunity to be in the room and to express these thoughts to you. I appreciate that you're dealing with me as an equal, but your policies are failing the aspirations of Black folks," was very much the dynamic that emerges between Lincoln and Douglass. I mean, Douglass was committed to full equality for Black people, Lincoln wasn't. And, as a result of that, there were times when that interest convergence, which would sometimes make them very good partners, would mean that they're on very distant places. And I think what Douglass was trying to do in that speech was to get Lincoln and his supporters to identify with the plight of Black people who have had to fight so hard just for basic security, basic freedom.

BRYAN STEVENSON:

And I think it was his hope that if you could get people to think about that, they would embrace this quest for freedom and the equality. Douglass called

Lincoln a "white man's president" and in many ways he was. And that was part of the reason why, when Lincoln was inviting Black leaders to the White House, to persuade them, to urge Black people to leave, to go back to Africa, he knew not to invite Frederick Douglass because Douglass was committed to full emancipation in this country. He said, "I was born in this country, I've toiled in this country, I've been fighting for equality and justice for this country. And you shouldn't be able to just dismiss me and send me away because of my color." So, there was complexity there, a lot of complexity there. I think Lincoln respected Douglass, but he didn't fully embrace the aspirations of not only Douglass, but of many emancipated Black people who wanted to be fully free.

The limitations of Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation

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BRYAN STEVENSON:

Well, I think he recognized that there was a moral necessity to reckon with the ravages of slavery. I don't think it's debated much that Lincoln's priority was preserving the Union. His priority was not ending slavery. And you'll recall that he did not actually say we're going to fight this war to end slavery. The South seceded, they initiated this conflict, and he wanted to make sure that the Union endured. I think it didn't mean that he didn't believe that slavery was wrong. I think he did. And I think when it came time to emancipating enslaved people in the rebelling states, and that's the thing you have to remember about the Emancipation Proclamation, it only granted emancipation, it only granted freedom to enslaved people in the rebelling states of the Confederacy. The enslaved people in Delaware, the enslaved people in Maryland, the enslaved people in Kentucky and in other parts of the country were not made free by the Emancipation Proclamation. If you're

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going to free enslaved people, you want to invoke all of the language, all of the forces that legitimate that Proclamation. And that's what Lincoln does.

The difficulty with it is that if you genuinely believed all of that, you would emancipate all enslaved people, which is not what the Proclamation does.

BRYAN STEVENSON:

It's an important step, obviously. It's an incredibly important moment in American history. But if we don't understand that it's not total emancipation, if it's not a complete repudiation of slavery in all of its form, in all locations, we misinterpret some of those words. We misinterpret some of that language. He knew that to keep these other border states out of the conflict, he had to concede, and he conceded by allowing them to continue to enslave people. That showed up. When I was in school, I actually grew up in southern Delaware, which was a border state. I remember being in sixth grade, and the teacher said to me... Integration that just come to our school. "Do you know what the Emancipation Proclamation is?" And I didn't say anything. He says, "Well, you need to know because that's what gave you your freedom." And I just sat there, and I felt a little humiliated that I was being talked to in this way. And then when I later learned that the Emancipation Proclamation actually didn't give enslaved people in that part of the state their freedom, I felt the need to write a letter to that civics teacher, that history teacher to make sure that there was an understanding. But that failed understanding, I think, is what gives some of the complexity around Lincoln. It's what makes it so important that we understand that that complexity is there.

How Black Americans fought for emancipation

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BRYAN STEVENSON:

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I mean, many people like Frederick Douglass wanted Lincoln, at the very outset, to allow Black people to fight during the Civil War. And he wanted it because he very much wanted the narrative to be that we fought for our freedom. He wanted to push back against this idea that there was something acceptable about bondage to enslave Black people, which a lot of white enslavers would perpetrate. They would try to make that argument and it was important to Douglass and other Black leaders that that be fundamentally rejected. And Harriet Tubman and others who were leading people out of slavery– to kind of make the point that we could kind of play a role in our own emancipation – ultimately wanted to engage in the fighting as a way of proving not only that slavery was wrong in all of its forms, but to claim our stake in this new democracy. And Frederick Douglass had his two sons join the Union Army. And that's how much he felt – he felt very strongly about that – even though the casualties and the fatalities were quite high – he was prepared to encourage his sons to engage in that battle because he believes you have to fight for freedom. And, like a lot of others, he wasn't satisfied to just be quote, "not enslaved." And it's part of the reason why some of his rhetoric was so intense. His 4th of July speech, what powerful speech – “this is not my holiday” – we aren't free. The collapse of Black opportunity during Reconstruction was just what he feared in a society where we weren't actually talking about the right things.

BRYAN STEVENSON:

And so, yes, I do think that what Black people did to, first of all, win the Civil War is an important part of the story; what Black people did to create an economy for this country that allowed it to thrive even after a Civil War; what Black people did to commit to the American idea of democracy and community after being mistreated for so long, abused for so long. I'm still struck by how little enslaved Black people resorted to violence and retribution and retaliation against those who had enslaved them. And I think that has to be acknowledged. We have to really honor this quest for a real

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America that was understood and shaped and embraced by Black people, even before it was embraced by white people, because the white people who had enslaved them used violence to intimidate, threaten, and to persecute them even after the Civil War, even after the 14th and 13th amendments and 15th amendment had guaranteed them rights. And I think that's the part of the American story that we haven't quite developed. And if we don't talk about that we do, do harm. We keep this false idea that if it weren't for the benevolence of white people, then slavery wouldn't have ended and this wouldn't have happened and that wouldn't have happened. It's just a distorted view of history.

What freedom meant to Black people

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BRYAN STEVENSON:

For many Black people who were born in this country, the model of freedom that they knew was what white people had. They saw white people who own things, who got married, who had children, who went to church, who, if they worked hard, were rewarded for their hard work. That's what freedom meant, that was the model of freedom that they had before them. So, they wanted that, they didn't want to just be not enslaved, they wanted to be free. And that interest in education, that interest in family, that interest in community, that interest in hard work that gets rewarded was very much a part of what emancipated formerly enslaved people were committed to. And in fact, I don't think that generation of formerly enslaved people have gotten near the credit that they deserve for believing enough in America, that when emancipation finally did come, they didn't want revenge. They didn't find ways to retaliate and to be violent with the people who had been violent with them, they said, "You know what? We believe in this society enough, we're going to actually step into it, participate in it, get our right to vote, commit to

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education", and Black people were committed to education. And so their quest for freedom was full freedom. It was the freedom that white people had, it was the freedom that other immigrants were getting when they came to this country.

BRYAN STEVENSON:

And I think for a lot of people, particularly during the Civil War era, freedom just meant we're not going to enslave you. We're not going to value, we're not going to give you protection, we're not going to give you rights, but we won't enslave you and you ought to be satisfied with that. And you can only justify that if you have held onto this view, that Black people are somehow not as good as white people. And that's why, for me, I don't think we are yet free. When I give talks, I say we're still not free because we still haven't been able to achieve opportunity and access to a lot of things without the burden of this long history, without these presumptions of dangerousness and guilt that get assigned to Black and brown people. I'm a lawyer, been working for a really long time, I've argued cases at the US Supreme Court. I got a lot of degrees and all of that, but I will still go places where I am presumed dangerous and guilty, and I have to navigate these presumptions. And I can tell you that when you get old enough, you get tired, you don't want to keep navigating these. And it bothers me that, here we are in the 21st century and we have a generation of Black babies being born, where they're still confronting these presumptions of dangerousness and guilt. And that's why this broader quest for freedom, this broader call for freedom is so urgent particularly now.

The Lincoln Memorial

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BRYAN STEVENSON:

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I've always loved the Lincoln Memorial because it does represent a place where the aspiration of American democracy is so well expressed. I think Lincoln was an extraordinary orator. His identity as a lawyer made him care a lot about words. And Lincoln said things that were powerful about what justice should mean. And you read those words and it's quite compelling. I think about the Emancipation Proclamation. Of course, when that was issued, it did not free all enslaved people. It was done to manage this war where enslaved Black people were needed to revolt, to resist in an active way.

BRYAN STEVENSON:

But the border states, who had agreed not to join the war, states like Kentucky and Delaware and Maryland, were very unnerved by it. They thought that by not joining the war, the reward would be that they got to keep slavery. And they did get to keep slavery. Some of them kept pressing Lincoln about this commitment. And I saw one of the letters that he wrote, and what he wrote to these enslavers in Kentucky is this- He made this statement: "If slavery is not wrong, nothing is wrong." It's a really powerful way to articulate the wrongfulness of this institution. His way with words was really inspiring. And when I was last at the Lincoln Memorial, I read those parts of his addresses that are engraved in that, and I was very moved by that. And I think he had a really compelling ability to articulate aspirations of a democracy of people in ways that you have to admire.

The legacy of slavery

00:47:38:00

BRYAN STEVENSON:

I think in many ways we are still living with the legacy of slavery, that we did not achieve its end in abolition, even with the North's victory during the Civil War, as I've said, I think the North won the Civil War, but the South won the

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narrative war. That idea of racial hierarchy, of exploitation of Black people for economic benefit, it survived. And we see evidence of that throughout the 20th century, convict leasing emergence at the end of the 19th; it's another kind of enslavement of Black people. Sharecropping and tenant farming were systems that were created to benefit white landowners and exploit Black labor throughout most of the 20th century. Even as we get into more industrial lives, forms of labor, Black people are disadvantaged, Black people are disfavored. Even when the American government needs Black bodies to go to war during World War I and World War II, they're not treated equally, they don't get the benefits of these victories. We passed the Voting Rights Act and the Civil Rights Act, and white people leave the schools because they don't want to have actual integration, and white leaders find new ways to suppress and limit the power of the Black vote. We're still contending with those issues today.

BRYAN STEVENSON:

So, I don't think it takes a lot of imagination to understand the ways in which our quest for freedom would have been altered. If the South had won the war, I think in many ways they did win a part of that war, and because of that, we are still struggling to win that freedom. And I just think if you think that there was this problem with slavery, Black people were brought here, everybody did it, nobody was really wrong, it's just what happened. And then, we fought a war and then slavery was over and everything was fine. So, let's move on and people should stop talking. If that's your view of American history, then you're never going to appreciate many of the issues that are happening around us. It's a false view, it's an uninformed view, it's an ignorant view, it's a view that a lot of people have been taught. Most people in this country don't get taught anything about the transatlantic slave trade and how it was the source of economic development in new England and New York. Most people can't even tell you how many enslaved people were actually brought to this continent during that era. When you start asking about the details of slavery

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and the nuances, they can't tell you about that either. We just kind of skip over that. They know a little bit about the Civil War, but then they see the North win and the assumption is everything is fine after that. They can't tell you about Reconstruction, they don't know about convict leasing, they know nothing about that era of lynching and the violence and the trauma that that created. They don't understand the way the demographic geography of this country is shaped by that mass exodus in the 20th century, which is rooted in lawlessness and violence. They learned something about Rosa Parks and Dr. King and they think, "Well, that then cleared up all the other issues," without appreciating that there was no concession. The governors of these Southern states didn't say, "Oh, you know what? You're right. This thing about segregation, this thing about white supremacy, we were wrong about that." They said segregation today, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever after the passage of the Civil Rights Act, after the passage of the Voting Rights Act. They positioned themselves as obstacles to integration and full opportunities for Black people. And that consciousness has never actually been acknowledged.

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BRYAN STEVENSON:

When was the moment when all of us said everything about our history, as it relates to the experience of Black people, enslavement and lynching and segregation was wrong. And we now must commit to never again allow racial bias and discrimination to undermine our democracy. When did that happen? Because I missed it. You have people saying things, but we've never made that commitment. And because we haven't made that commitment, you see at the beginning of 2021, people storming the Capitol with Confederate flags and gallows and nooses in an effort to, quote, "Make America great again," as if somehow our best days were in that 19th century, when Black people were still enslaved. Or our best days were during that period of time when Black

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people were being lynched, or our best days were during that era when the law prohibited Black people from going to school or having equal opportunity. And I just think, until we reckon with that history, with that understanding, we're going to find new manifestations of this problem. I think a lot of people a century ago would have believed that by now we would live in a country where these disparities based on race, where these attitudes of racial bias, where white supremacy had been permanently eliminated, that has not happened. And it won't happen a hundred years from now if we just keep repeating the same false ideas about our past and about our background.

BRYAN STEVENSON:

My big critique of our whole conversation about our whole discourse around the Civil War and that period of American history is I think too many people believe that slavery ended in 1865, that the problems of Black people were ended on the battlefield, when that's just simply not true. And the essential problem of racial hierarchy and white supremacy, which was at the heart of this conflict, was never addressed. It wasn't addressed by Lincoln, it wasn't addressed by many in Congress, and it certainly wasn't addressed by our courts. And that's what has set up a 150 years of conflict and struggle and challenge that we're still contending with today. I admire Lincoln. I value Lincoln's commitment to seeing the war through. To making concessions, to allowing Black soldiers to fight, to continuing to insist on movement toward abolition. But I just think it has to be placed in context. I just think when we exaggerate and overstate... I think we compromise on a true understanding of our history and a true understanding of who we are and where we are at this moment.

American ideology of racial difference

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BRYAN STEVENSON:

I think the era of single leaders guiding us through difficult moments has largely passed. I just think governance in the United States is no longer entirely in the hands of a president. You've got a tech sector that has huge sway over how people act and think. You have local leaders that can shape attitudes and thoughts at the local level. You have corporations, you have influencers, you have media, all of these institutions are stronger and more influential. I think the idea that a single national leader can address these fundamental challenges is simply not credible, at least to me. I think we all have an obligation to learn our history and to reckon with it. When we do that, we all become equipped to actually achieve the kind of just society that we want, to achieve movement of this country toward that place where we have equality where there's freedom. I don't think we can wait any longer for another King or another Lincoln or another anybody. I think the burden is now on us. We've gotten to this place where all of us have access, most of us have access to information. We just have to commit to it. That's why for me, it's important that we understand who our leaders have been, where they succeeded, where they failed. It's important to understand what the institution of slavery was really about. It's important to understand what the civil war did and didn't. It's important to understand our history from reconstruction until the 1960s. It's important to understand what the experience of Blackness and being a person of color is like in this country today. With that understanding, I think we can get where we're trying to go. I'm really persuaded by that.

BRYAN STEVENSON:

I don't think you can achieve equality. I don't think you can achieve a healthy community unless you're willing to engage in truth telling about it. I come from a faith tradition that is rooted in a central idea, and they believe that every- my people believe that all of us can achieve redemption, salvation,

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fulfillment. They invite people into these spaces where they offer that. They say, "You cannot achieve these things unless you are first willing to confess, to repent." If you come to my church and you say, "I want the heaven and the redemption- I want all that good stuff, but I don't want to talk about anything bad." They'll say, "It doesn't work like that. You've got to first confess. You've got the first repent." It's not just to make you feel bad, but it's because it is a process. When you acknowledge the mistake and the error and the harm and the wrong, you then appreciate the remedy, the repair, the restoration, the reconciliation, the redemption means something to you that you hold on to. Societies that have moved forward, have moved forward precisely because they've been willing to engage in that truth teller. I wouldn't go to Germany if it was a place where Adolf Hitler statues were everywhere. If they were still celebrating the architects and defenders of the Holocaust and the Third Reich, I wouldn't go there. I'm sorry. I just wouldn't. it wouldn't matter what else they were doing. I would not feel safe in that space. But because there is a reckoning with the Holocaust, because there are memorials, because you can't go 200 meters without seeing the stones and the other emblems, because there are no Adolf Hitler statues, I'm prepared to go. I'm prepared to respect what's happening there. I know it's not a perfect space, but I understand that there's been some progress.

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BRYAN STEVENSON:

I think that's the reason why you have to commit to truth telling. You commit to truth telling, because you want the reconciliation, you want the restoration, you want the redemption and you commit to truth and justice because I believe there's something better waiting for us. I really do. I don't talk about this stuff because I want to punish America for lynching and slavery and all of these terrible things. I'm not interested in getting people to confront the realities of slavery because I want to punish America for this. I'm

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interested in talking about these things because I want to get us to liberation. I really believe there's something better waiting for us. There is something that feels more like freedom, feels more like equality, feels more like justice than anybody in this country has seen collectively, but to get there we have to stop this false history. We have to push back against these false ideas. We have to deal honestly. We have to tell the truth about our history, about who we are and about how we get here. And when we do that, that's when we open ourselves up to the kind of reconciliation, restoration, redemption repair, that I think any broken society needs, any fallen society needs. And we have been broken by this history. There's just no two ways about it. I think the idea that you can overcome an injury, overcome a lethal disease without care and treatment is just a misguided idea. People die every day holding on to that idea. The people who commit to the care, to the treatment, those are the ones that live and thrive and actually create new hope and new and a new future.

BRYAN STEVENSON:

I think what we're seeing today is really dramatic evidence of what happens when you fail to talk honestly about your history. When you actually believe that the best time in American history was 150 years ago, was a hundred years ago, was 50 years ago. If some German leader comes along and says, "Make Germany great again," and they started invoking the Germany of the 1930s, we know enough about what happened to understand what that represents. But in this country, we are actually so uninformed about our history that we actually think our best days were in some prior past. Well, as a Black person, I'm really confused by it because I really want to know, are you saying our best days were when Black people were enslaved or when we were lynched? When we were excluded and segregated? When we were denied opportunities? Help me understand it. For women, when were the best days? Before they had the right to vote? When they weren't in positions of leadership? When they couldn't have the opportunities that other men

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had? It's only because of that false history that you can say some of these things. And I'm less interested in political beliefs and values, but I am interested in a true understanding of who we are. It's like everything else. If you think that smoking doesn't cause cancer, doesn't hurt you and you just keep, then you're going to see elevated death rates. You just are. When you confront the truth of it, you begin to understand some things about that habit that will cause you to shift your behavior.

BRYAN STEVENSON:

If you think cancer doesn't kill you and you won't get treatment for it, you're going to die. You're going to see death rates increase. The same is true for a healthy democracy. If you think that you can leave unaddressed this fundamental question of equality and justice and freedom and racial injustice and racial inequality, and be a thriving, healthy democracy, you're going to be sadly mistaken. We're at a moment in our nation's history where I think that reckoning is upon us. This is an opportunity. We do a lot of things to kind of make it easy for people to not have to talk about this, to not look at this. Well, we see Black people achieving over here, we see Black people achieving over there. We see Black people— that's happening so we don't have to deal with this. It doesn't work like that. This is the fundamental issue. Yes, I do think truth telling about our history has never been more urgent. Truth-telling generally, I mean, this is such a time of disinformation and confusion that if we don't commit to truth telling in a really profound way, we're not going to preserve this democracy. We're not going to have the kind of just free America that many of us want to see.

Our choice of words

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BRYAN STEVENSON:

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I do think language is really important. I think the people who have had platforms that get to define things, that get to describe things, because they haven't been very representative of the entire population, the language reflects a certain kind of bias. So I don't use the word slave. I don't think people were slaves. That suggests an identity. That's what they were. No. People were *enslaved*. They were *put into* bondage, that wasn't their natural condition. That's not who they are. We don't say to people who have been kidnapped, "You're an abductee," or something. It's something we do to someone. I think these words have power because when you realize that there were no such thing as "slaves," there were people who were enslaved. It changes your focus. The focus isn't on the person, it's on the people who enslaved them. It's on the enslaver. Even terms, and I don't get hung up too much on it, but even terms like slave owner, to me, that kind of built, that feeds the lie that people could be owned. It's a false notion. Human beings can't be owned by another person. I prefer the term enslaver because that's what they were. They enslaved other people.

BRYAN STEVENSON:

And we've been doing work on lynching violence. I like to use the word terrorism to describe that era, because we now have a consciousness about terrorism. We actually think that people who are terrorists are worse than criminals. We can put terrorists in prisons and never give them a trial. We recognize the threat posed by, that we have different rules for terrorists and what happened to Black people between reconstruction and the 1950s and 60s was terrorism. When mobs were allowed to pull people out of their homes and beat them and torture them and burn them and lynch them on the courthouse lawn with impunity, that's terrorism. You can't appreciate the trauma that Black people had to navigate until you understand that they were dealing with terrorism. They weren't dealing with crimes. These weren't crimes, this was terrorism. So language does matter. When we talk about civil rights laws and segregation, you know, those signs that said white and

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colored, they weren't directions, they were assaults. That was violent. It's violent to live in a world where you're told you can't go through this door, but that door. It forces you to behave in a way that is not natural or normal or healthy. When you have to behave in ways that are not healthy or natural in normal, you create injuries. These injuries weren't self-inflicted, they were created by people who developed a system that insisted on racial hierarchy that insisted on racial segregation and the people who perpetrated and defended that system did something destructive and violent to a race of people. You have to understand that. The language matters a lot. I hope that as new people get there occupy the spaces of historians and writers and filmmakers and storytellers, that the language can begin to reflect a more honest accounting of this history.

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