CHRISTOPHER BONNER
LINCOLN'S DILEMMA
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

Christopher Bonner Interview
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Interviewed by Jackie Olive & Barak Goodman
Total Running Time: 01:15:47

START TC: 00:00:00:00

CREW MEMBER:
Awesome. Roll sound. Roll camera.

CREW MEMBER:
Call it.

CREW MEMBER:
Chris Bonner interview. Take one. Mark.

JACKIE OLIVE:
Okay Dr. Bonner you're a pro at this.

The importance of using the term "enslaved people"

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CHRIS BONNER:

I think that it's actually really important to be sure that we distinguish between a *slave* as a way to describe enslaved people and *enslaved people*. I think that there's a really significant difference and it's far more than just a semantic debate or sort of academic debate. When a person is described as a slave, it can be very easy to forget or obscure the realities of their humanity. But when we describe an enslaved person as such, as a person who was held in bondage, we recognize that there was nothing natural about the fact of their enslavement. Even though people were born into the institution of

slavery, that wasn't a natural condition, that wasn't necessarily a permanent descriptor of their status.

CHRIS BONNER:

I think it's also really important that we recognize that- so slavery was an institution defined by the forcible and often violent exploitation of labor, but that was not the entirety of an enslaved person's life. And so calling someone a slave can make it seem like all they did was work and suffer, but much more went on in enslaved people's lives. We know about enslaved communities. We know about family relations. We know about the politics and the struggles and the negotiations between enslaved people and slave owners. We know about music and culture and sort of folk literature. So thinking about enslaved people as *people* and describing them as people held in bondage really invites, and I think, encourages people to try to understand and try to think about the full scope of Black humanity in slavery, rather than thinking about them simply as slaves.

Enslaved people in the antebellum Southern economy

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CHRIS BONNER:

One of the really interesting things about the South and the South's economy, is that in the late antebellum period, and really into the Civil War, when Confederate States start printing more of their own money, you see images of Southern money that shows both cotton and enslaved people, and in some cases enslaved people picking or cultivating cotton. And so there's a $10 note from Alabama from the 1850s that sort of really central to the image are these- or really central to the the bill, are images of enslaved people carrying sacks or baskets filled with overflowing cotton, and you can really get a sense of the ways in which slavery and cotton were integral and really closely

integrated within the Southern economy. I think it's really fascinating that white southerners, that southerners in positions of power, were so explicit and so clear about the sources of Southern wealth. That $10 was founded upon the exploited labor of people and the forced work to cultivate cotton by enslaved people in that state. And so the, you know, the money shows you, it tells you a true story about the history of the Southern economy.

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CHRIS BONNER:

The economy of the South in the antebellum period was deeply connected to cotton as a crop, this valuable national and really global product. But the economy was also really closely tied to the value of enslaved people. Enslaved people were a foundation for relations of credit. People would often take out mortgages based on their ownership of enslaved people. So they would take out loans essentially that were collateralized by African-Americans.

CHRIS BONNER:

There was a recognition, I think, in things like Southern money that shows both cotton and enslaved people, a recognition that as valuable as the cotton was, the enslaved people who were forced to cultivate the cotton were also really central to the economy. They were valuable not only because they were forced to cultivate cotton, which was valuable, but they were, in their own right, a really critical piece of the Southern economy. Sources suggest that aside from land itself, that enslaved people were the most valuable thing. Enslaved people made up the largest amount of wealth in the South before the Civil War. And so there's a massive amount of money that's tied up in bound African-Americans.

Enslaved people shaping the terms of their labor

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Chris Bonner:

We know that enslaved people were always trying to gain some control over their work, and one way that we know this was the case, was that slave owners watched so closely. That overseer was a job. That there were people whose job was to make sure enslaved people were working as they were expected to work.

CHRIS BONNER:

But we also know that enslaved people were doing things to try to shape the terms of that labor. And so there's an example of this that we're sort of pretty sure was a song that enslaved people might sing at work that was called *Hoe Emma Hoe*, and it was a sort of simple rhythmic kind of call and response song. Some of the traits that we know were popular from African-American music in this period. And you can envision it being sung at a pretty slow tempo, like Hoe Emma Hoe, to try to sort of moderate the pace of work. But you can also envision it being sung much more quickly when enslaved people were off work, when they were at the house, when they were around their cabins relaxing and sort of just enjoying their time together.

CHRIS BONNER:

And so thinking about the ability to talk with one another through a song, I think gives us a sense of some of the tools that enslaved people would use to try to control the pace of their work. Essentially, if you're singing the song slowly as a way to suggest a pace for work, if everybody's working at the same pace, then it will be less easy for an overseer or for a slave owner to call out someone for working particularly slowly, and so it's a way to sort of make sure that nobody makes anybody else look bad and nobody sort of makes things more difficult for anyone else. It's a way to talk together about how we want to work today.

Adapting and modernizing slavery to maximize wealth

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Chris Bonner:

I think there's a long standing perception of slavery as something that was pre-modern or anti-modern, that it was this traditional, almost feudal, kind of labor relation in which landowners provided for bound people and those bound people did work for the landowners. But we know, and I think recent scholarship has really suggested, that slavery as an institution was adapting and changing dramatically across the early 19th century.

CHRIS BONNER:

One way to think about the sort of adaptation of slavery is the process of the second middle passage, the movement of hundreds of thousands of enslaved people from the upper South into the lower South, moving them from places where tobacco had been cultivated in the colonial period, but was sort of fading out as a cash crop, into the places where they could be forced to produce eventually millions and millions of bales of valuable cotton. That was an adaptation. The movement of working people from one place to another.

CHRIS BONNER:

We also know that slave owners developed or pursued all sorts of agricultural science to try to maximize the production of cotton, to think about when exactly they should plant, how exactly they should treat the soil, what sorts of crops they should use. And so slavery survived and thrived for so long as an economic system because slave owners were adapting, because it was very modern in the sense of trying to maximize productivity through- and really maximize wealth by maximizing productivity.

"Gradual abolition" and the creation of a free Black population in the North

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CHRIS BONNER:

One of the stories of the early United States is the process of creating a free African-American population, and largely this took place in the Northern states. Essentially during the Revolutionary War, during the revolutionary period, many lawmakers started to have doubts about the ethics, the morality, of slavery, and part of how they start to come to these doubts is that in some states, and we know in Connecticut and Massachusetts, enslaved people were partitioning for their freedom, and they were saying, it doesn't really make sense for a government that claims to be founded on liberty to hold dozens or hundreds or thousands of people in bondage, and so we are seeking our freedom based on the ideas, or the ideals, that are being expressed in national and state founding documents. And so in States like Connecticut and Massachusetts and New York in the 1770s, 80s, and 90s, lawmakers enact measures that enable the sort of gradual move of large numbers of people from slavery to freedom.

CHRIS BONNER:

New York enacts a law in 1799 that says that enslaved people will be emancipated gradually. That enslaved women would be freed when they reach age 25, enslaved men would be freed when they reached age 28. And part of the reason why these laws were for gradual emancipation rather than immediate abolition was that white northerners, white lawmakers, were really anxious about Black freedom. There was a lot of concern that African-Americans, when they had been held in bondage, that they didn't develop a real sense of like what was morally right or wrong. The theory went that enslaved people weren't making decisions about how to live, and so they lacked a well-developed moral compass.

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CHRIS BONNER:

So there was a lot of fear among white northerners that formerly enslaved people would turn to crime, or that they would be less likely to want to work to support themselves and that they might be a threat to the stability of New York's communities. And so lawmakers enact these gradual abolition laws in the hope that they will slow down the process of bringing free Black people into their communities. So gradual abolition, I think, reflects a feeling that slavery is wrong, but also a lot of racial prejudice about whether Black people can really belong in Northern, or really American, communities.

The Black experience in New York

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CHRIS BONNER:

One of the things that's interesting about slavery in the Northern states is that it was not defined by agricultural production. It was not defined by a sort of single type of work. And so enslaved people in a place like New York, particularly in New York City, would have often been required to do domestic service. They would have been required to do sort of construction work to build roads and to help sort of- help ensure that the city would expand as it wanted to. They would be required to cart things from one place to another. They were doing all of the work that made New York a sort of vibrant commercial hub. They were involved in various kinds of industry and economic activity in a way that reflected, I think, the complexity of that Northern economy, as opposed to a more sort of monoculture economy in a place like Alabama, where everything was about producing cotton.

The tensions between white and Black abolitionists

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Chris Bonner:

I think there was always a kind of tension in terms of the relations between Black and white abolitionists. There was a feeling among many white abolitionists that they were capable of and they had the ability to do the really intense, theoretical thinking and theoretical sort of argumentation about why slavery was unjust and that, you know, people like William Lloyd Garrison would offer the thought for abolitionism, and people like Frederick Douglass, Garrison would say, could tell the story. They could provide firsthand evidence of what was horrific about slavery.

CHRIS BONNER:

There was an idea that white abolitionists could appeal to people's minds while Black abolitionists would have to appeal to people's hearts. And there is some merit to this perception, right? There's something distinctive about the kind of emotional appeal that someone like Frederick Douglass could make based on his own experiences of bondage. But it's also really unfair and ultimately we know quite untrue to think that someone like Douglass, because he had been enslaved, because he was Black, could only appeal to the heart, right? We know that Douglass was a really rigorous thinker about democracy and about the sort of ideological foundations of the nation and why exactly slavery was opposed to, or stood in opposition to those foundations.

CHRIS BONNER:

One of the other things that I think is really evident here is, is not just a sense of like what Douglass could offer as a formerly enslaved person. There's a bigger picture thing here or truth here, which is that a lot of white abolitionists were not invested in racial equality. They were not dedicated to this idea. They weren't fully convinced that someone like Douglass could do

all the same things that they could do. They were not fully convinced that Black people and white people have the same abilities or capacities, or should possess the same rights, even as they were deeply dedicated to the idea that slavery was evil.

Lincoln on slavery

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Chris Bonner:

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.

CHRIS BONNER:

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 slave holding 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.

Anti-slavery, practical abolitionists, and radical abolitionists

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Chris Bonner:

I think of anti-slavery as a broad category and it, it means exactly what it sounds like: someone who was opposed to slavery, but that could take a variety of different forms. So someone like Abraham Lincoln was opposed to slavery morally. He thought it was wrong, but someone like William Lloyd Garrison was, and said very explicitly that he was an immediate abolitionist. He believed not only that slavery was wrong, but also that slavery must end immediately, because slavery was evil. And so there's I think a significant difference and both Lincoln and Garrison would have understood themselves as tremendously different from one another as antislavery and abolitionist. So all abolitionists are anti-slavery, but not all anti-slavery people were abolitionists. And then even within the work of abolitionism, there were sort of different categories or different kinds of work that people were pursuing.

CHRIS BONNER:

So there were a number of free Black and white northerners who would work together to advance what they would have called practical abolitionism, which was largely about trying to protect Black northerners from kidnapping and to defend fugitive slaves in the North when they arrived there from arrest at the hands of slave catchers. And so these are folks who were working... They would call it practical abolitionism, because they were working in really tangible ways to defend actual people from the real possibility of enslavement. And then even, you know, there's not only a divide in terms of tactics in that regard, but there's a big divide between someone like Garrison,

who was a radical immediate abolitionist, and someone like John Brown, who went to the South purportedly with the desire to free actual enslaved people in Virginia. And so there's a broad array of approaches to abolitionism. And all of those approaches were pursued by people who thought differently about slavery than someone like Lincoln, who was anti-slavery, someone who believed slavery was wrong, was different from someone who was actually working to make slavery end.

Lincoln's path to the Emancipation Proclamation

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CHRIS BONNER:

There are a lot of different ways to think about how Lincoln comes to embrace emancipation as a policy. And one way that I think about it is that there are pressures being exerted on Lincoln from various sides or various angles. There are black abolitionists and white abolitionists who are taking Lincoln to task for not being active enough in the efforts to promote the war as a war for freedom. Frederick Douglass said that Lincoln was embracing the 'slave power' or allowing the slave power to survive by not actively working to end slavery during the war.

CHRIS BONNER:

There are also pressures coming from within the government. And so in a way this pressure that Lincoln is feeling is rooted in the choices that enslaved people made to run to freedom in the earliest stages of the war. So when enslaved people run to Fort Monroe in 1861, General Benjamin Butler was forced to make a decision about what to do with those people. Butler's decision and his choice to keep those people and claim them as contraband of war, that led to and sort of put pressure on Congress to make some decision about whether what he was doing was legal or not.

CHRIS BONNER:

And so Congress enacts the confiscation policies that essentially make the U.S. army a vehicle for liberation in formal terms. And so all of that is sort of exerting pressure on Lincoln as president. That the army is out in front of him, congress is out in front of him, of course enslaved people themselves are out in front of him on this policy or on this process of emancipation. And they are sort of leading the charge that creates the, you know, the area into which Lincoln steps in as a president who was acting to take steps to end slavery. So there's a lot of different sources of ideas and activity that are shaping Lincoln's thinking, and that are really carving out the path for him to become the president who leads the nation toward emancipation.

How information about the Civil War was spread among enslaved

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Chris Bonner:

We know that enslaved people communicated extensively, that they had networks of rumor networks of conversation that spread across plantations. And between plantations in the South. We know that in April and May of 1861, enslaved people were running to union forces in Florida and in Maryland and eventually in Virginia, most famously at Fort Monroe. And we know that they were doing that because they shared expectations about what might happen when they got there. So, we don't know exactly how word spread, but we know that the numbers of enslaved people who sought out the Union forces suggest that word was spreading. And so three men run to Benjamin Butler at Fort Monroe and seek freedom, seek refuge with the Union army. And when they do that, they are part of a move of dozens of people who had been trying to get into Fort Monroe in the months before that.

CHRIS BONNER:

Butler takes these men in, in 1861 and within days afterward, almost 50 more enslaved people have run to Fort Monroe to join, to follow those three men, who Butler took in. And so we don't know for certain like whether there were notes being passed or people traveling and shouting about what was happening. But I think that the fact that dozens more people follow those first three men who are accepted into Fort Monroe, suggests something of how information was spreading. It was spreading enough to nearby plantations that enslaved people knew, in 1861, we can go to Fort Monroe and we can seek refuge there.

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CHRIS BONNER:

We know as historians and we know as sort of observers and students of the past that the Civil War was about slavery. That white southerners seceded, because they were interested in protecting and defending slavery. And we can imagine that because slavery was such a sort of important topic, and this was such a critical national crisis that white southerners were talking a lot amongst their families and across families about slavery and about their sense that the union army and that Lincoln posed a threat to slavery. And so I think that that's one of the sort of foundational sources of knowledge about the war for enslaved people. Slave owners were worried about slavery. And so when enslaved people hear slave owners expressing those worries, expressing the fear that Lincoln might free the slaves, that might shape some of enslaved people's ideas about Lincoln. “If my owner hates Lincoln, then hey, maybe I like Lincoln. Maybe I have hope for what Lincoln might mean for me or my family or my neighbors.” Right? And so there's a logical way to see slave owners own worries, sort of generating information and knowledge for enslaved people.

Lincoln's views on Black Americans and full racial equality

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Chris Bonner:

One of the last things that Lincoln did before his assassination, in one of his final speeches, he said that he was sort of moving toward trying to develop a policy that would allow certain Black men to vote. And he singled out Black men who had served in the union army as people who were capable of voting or people who should be allowed to vote. This was a really major transformation in Lincoln's advocacy. So in 1862, Lincoln was asking Black leaders to encourage other Black people to leave the United States. He was trying to advocate colonization. He was working from a perspective that African-Americans could not belong in the United States. Three years later, by 1865, he's trying to move the nation toward political rights for certain Black men. So this is a major change in terms of Lincoln's views of inclusion. Black people can belong on certain terms, but I think it's really important that we don't see this as a statement or an embrace of racial equality.

CHRIS BONNER:

There were a lot of white men who voted every year or every four years, without having served in the U.S. army. And Lincoln is saying the only men that he's singling out, Black men who had served in the U.S. army as those who were fit to vote. So while those Black men were being included, Black people were not being included on equal terms. And so Lincoln, even in this last moment when he's sort of moving toward Black inclusion, he is not embracing African-Americans on equal terms. So it's important that we see Lincoln as a person who was evolving in terms of his thinking about Black Americans. But it's also really important that we don't paint Lincoln as a

racial egalitarian or as someone who is invested in equal African-American inclusion. Never in his life, was he an advocate of full racial equality.

The complex meanings of 'slave power' in the antebellum period

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Chris Bonner:

Roger Taney's decision in the Dred Scott case, theoretically opened the entire country to the institution of slavery. Taney said that the government had no right to restrict slave owners from bringing their property wherever slave owners chose to bring it. This was alarming to people like Lincoln, to anti-slavery northerners, to people who opposed the expansion of slavery. The concern was that free white workers would have to compete with wealthy slave owners and with unpaid Black workers. And that this would be detrimental to white northerners. The way that Lincoln came to and started to frame this concern, or was a concern about, what was called at the time, a 'slave power' or a 'slave power conspiracy.' This was an idea that was circulating among political leaders who were anti-slavery in the North from at least the 1840s. And it was sort of evolving and developing into a more public anxiety by the 1850s.

CHRIS BONNER:

But the theory was that powerful people in the government, members of the Supreme Court and of Congress and Democratic presidents, that they were acting together to try to make the entirety of the United States open to slavery. The idea was that slave owners had, and they did have, disproportionate power in the federal government. The three-fifths compromise from the constitution, which allowed slave owners, which allowed Southern States to count three out of every five enslaved people when it came to determined representation in Congress.

CHRIS BONNER:

That gave Southern States more power than they should have. Because clearly enslaved people weren't being represented, but they were being counted in terms of how many representatives a state would have. And so there were more Southern or more pro-slavery congressmen. There were more pro-slavery or Southern presidents. There were more pro-slavery or southern Supreme Court justices. There was a reality of power in the federal government weighted toward the interests of slavery. Lincoln by the 1850s comes to see or at least comes to begin arguing that that slave power is actively encroaching on the Northern States. And so you can really see the ways that like moderate anti-slavery actors are coming to embrace, I think, this sort of radical anxiety about the reach of slave owners and the dangers of pro-slavery policy for the country as a whole.

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CHRIS BONNER:

The 'slave power' conspiracy and Lincoln's concern about this was not a shift to a moral sense that slavery was wrong or a sense that slavery must end where it exists. It was a concern, it was an anti-slavery concern rooted in white northerners feelings. And this was I think characteristic much of Lincoln and much of sort of moderate anti-slavery in the North, in the antebellum period. It was anti-slavery that was concerned with what slavery meant to white people, rather than what slavery meant to enslaved African-Americans. So there are a couple ways to think about this. It's a way to see the sort of limits of racial egalitarianism in the antebellum North. There's also a way to think about this as, like, how harmful slavery actually was that there were white northerners who felt so negatively affected by slavery that they could come to oppose it. It's a way to think about like the complexity of slavery as a problem.

CHRIS BONNER:

When you think about someone like Lincoln, who was moderately anti-slavery, who opposed the expansion of the institution, I think that it leads us to see some of the complexity in the coming of the Civil war. I think that some people might say that if you say the Civil War was about slavery, that's oversimplifying things.

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CHRIS BONNER:

But I think that really, when you say the Civil War was about slavery, that requires you to see the complex meanings of slavery to so many different people. For many white southerners, it was about protecting their pockets. For many other white southerners it was about- slavery was about white supremacy. It was about defending their distinction from Black southerners. For many Black people, slavery was about the immediate problem of their bondage or the bondage of their families. For others who were freed, it was about the threat of kidnapping in the North. At the same time, there were white northerners who said slavery was morally evil and it must be eradicated everywhere. And there were other white northerners who said slavery is, you know, just not what we want in Illinois or in Minnesota or Wisconsin or wherever it might be. And so saying that civil war was about slavery requires us to see the really complex meanings of slavery to so many different constituencies in the antebellum United States.

Mutual protection societies

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Chris Bonner:

In the antebellum period, Black northerners established a series of groups that were really designed to defend or protect African-Americans from the threat of kidnapping at the hands of slave catchers. There's a real history of

fugitive slaves making their way North and settling in cities like Philadelphia or New York or Boston. In an urban area, there were a lot of folks around, it was easier for a fugitive slave to hide out. There's also a real history of white southerners, either going North or sending their agents to the North to try to arrest fugitive slaves. And one of the things that happens is that free Black people or people who may have been fugitives but are not the particular fugitives who are being tracked, they might be arrested. Their freedom, their position in the North was endangered by slave catchers and slave owners and their agents.

CHRIS BONNER:

And so Black northerners and in some cases aligned with white northerners, established organizations to try to defend Black freedom. One of the organizations we know of, the New York Committee of Vigilance was established in 1835, and it was a sort of alliance of Black and white northerners together. Part of what I think is really interesting about these groups and groups like the New York Committee of Vigilance is how bold they were in some of their work. We have records of vigilance committee meetings, where they say that they took collections at local churches. And so there's a way to see, you know, to envision a group of Black folks saying, going to a church and saying, "Please donate to help this organization that is supporting the safety of fugitive slaves." There was a sort of a- a literal collective investment. People were putting money in a collection plate to endorse an organization that was technically in some cases, breaking the law, defending fugitive slaves from the threat of recapture.

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CHRIS BONNER:

And so there's a way to think about these vigilance committees as sort of operating illegally in the open in a lot of cases. And bringing together a broad array of Black people. So it's not only the Black folks who are out in front of

slave catchers, trying to beat them up and defend fugitive slaves, but there are Black folks who are putting in pennies and nickels and whatever money they might have to actually fund the work of the vigilance committee who were endorsing that vision of practical abolition and taking part, really participating in that kind of politics.

Black abolitionists

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CHRIS BONNER:

I think when a lot of people think about Black abolitionists, they think about vocal leading figures, the people whose names you know, most notably Frederick Douglass, people who were writing and putting their words and voices out there in public. One of the questions that I think often arises is like how many Black abolitionists were there or how many people were actually involved in this kind of work. It's a question that would be hard to answer. But what we do know is that, in the same way that anti-slavery was a broad umbrella and abolitionism was one part or one aspect of politics within anti-slavery, abolitionism was a broad category of activity. I would define abolitionism as work that is intended to fight slavery and try to potentially eradicate slavery.

CHRIS BONNER:

And so there are a lot of ways that abolitionism could take place. One thing that abolitionism entailed was writing slave narratives, describing the evils of slavery to try to convince White Northerners that slavery was wrong. Another thing that abolitionism entailed was defending fugitive slaves or alleged fugitive slaves from kidnappers, trying to protect them from the people who were coming to bring them into slavery.

CHRIS BONNER:

Another way to think about what abolitionism entailed is the sort of day-to-day work that Black folks were doing to try to guard their own safety. There are, you know, there's anecdotal evidence that we have of Black couples living in a place like Philadelphia, who were aware of the threat of kidnapping and the wives would always remind their husbands or the husbands would always remind their wives to make sure that they have their freedom papers with them when they go out.

CHRIS BONNER:

And that is a kind of abolitionism. That is the really direct work Black folks were doing to try to make sure that more Black folks didn't end up in bondage. And thinking about abolitionism that way really gives us a sense of how many Black people were involved in the political work of fighting slavery and how essential that political work was to Black life, to Black freedom. I think in a lot of ways, it was hard to be free in the North without doing something, at the very least to try to defend yourself from being enslaved.

Examples of how fugitive slaves avoided kidnapping

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Chris Bonner:

There's an interesting document that I've seen that is essentially a bunch of numbers in a circle, like one through eight. And inside those numbers are a bunch of letters and the letters are supposed to represent slave catchers and a fugitive slave. And the numbers are supposed to indicate to African-Americans and to white northerners where exactly they would stand in order to try to do the work of liberating a fugitive slave or an alleged fugitive from the hands of these slave catchers.

CHRIS BONNER:

And so this kind of document is a marker of the intellectual work, the planning work that went into practical abolition, that people were strategizing and trying to figure out how best to coordinate their efforts to make sure that they could defend as many people from bondage as possible. That they knew exactly how to approach the problem of a slave catcher in the North. So I think that that kind of document reflects some real planning, real coordination on the part of Black and white Northerners to fight slavery.

CHRIS BONNER:

So I'm thinking about a story from 1837 when an enslaved man- or an alleged fugitive slave who was allegedly named Jake, but who went by the name William Dixon in New York, he was arrested and brought to trial at City Hall. And in the midst of his trial on one afternoon, a crowd of somewhere around 1,000 Black and white New Yorkers gathered outside of New York City Hall and eventually attacked the sheriffs who were leading Dixon out of City Hall and tried to free him in that moment.

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CHRIS BONNER:

And so we don't know exactly how that massive crowd came together on that day, but there is some suggestion that there was a Black newspaper editor who was saying, "We need to have as many Black people as possible watching, like overseeing these hearings involving alleged fugitive slaves." And so I think of that as a kind of informal coordination. Like there's not necessarily like a letter circulating across Black New York, but there is this statement coming out that says, "We should be there."

CHRIS BONNER:

It's a call to arms, a call to action, and it's a statement that seems to have worked. Like the feeling was that this arrest of the man who went by the

name William Dixon was urgent, was concerning enough for hundreds, 1,000 Black people to come together to try to defend his freedom. And so there's a kind of informal coordination that happens through an ideological alignment. Slavery is wrong, we should defend people from slavery. 1,000 people show up to do so.

'Contraband' policy in the U.S. military

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Chris Bonner:

In 1861, General Benjamin Butler, who was in charge at Fort Monroe in southeastern Virginia, takes in three enslaved men who had run to the fort. And Butler takes them in and declares that they are contraband of war. What he means by that is that they were property of his enemy, they were property of the rebel South and therefore it was within his bounds, under the laws of war to confiscate that property, to claim it as his own in order to weaken his enemy.

CHRIS BONNER:

"Contraband" comes to be the term under which enslaved African-Americans were named. It was what they were called throughout the Civil War. Any enslaved person who ran to the Union Army, was deemed on some level of the documentation, was deemed "contraband." And so it's rooted, that language of contraband is rooted in Butler's justification for the taking of fugitive slaves from rebel Southerners.

CHRIS BONNER:

One of the things that's interesting about the language of contraband is, what it says about Black people's status in the Civil War era. Black people were "contraband," or by declaring Black people "contraband," it was a statement

that they were and remained property. They were taken from the South because they were valuable property. They were embraced within the Union lines because they were valuable property to the South.

CHRIS BONNER:

And so, one of the things that I think the language of contraband reflects is the limited sense of Black people's value as people during the Civil War. They were valued by the Union army because they were useful property to the South. The legal understanding of these fugitive slaves, runaway enslaved people was that they were property. And that understanding, I think, shapes their treatment during the war.

CHRIS BONNER:

One of the sort of hallmarks of Black Americans' experience with the Union Army or once they ran to the Union lines was that, as they arrived, they would have been examined to determine whether they fit a U.S. Military definition of able-bodied or whether they fit a definition of serviceable. They were to be put to work. Black women would typically work as cooks or as laundresses. Black men would dig ditches, they would haul materials, they would dig graves to bury the Union dead. The idea of Black life during the Civil War from the perspective of the Union army was, "How can we make these people useful? How can we sort of find value in them as workers?"

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CHRIS BONNER:

And so, there are ways in which the process of emancipation during the Civil War in some ways, plays into or feeds off of the understanding of what slavery was. Enslaved people were taken in as "contraband," they were taken in as property, enslaved people were taken in to do work. They were valued for their labor in the same ways that they might have been when they were held in bondage. And so there's a way to see the persistence of racial

inequality and a sort of Black subordination in the relations between African-Americans and the U.S. Military during the war.

Confederate reaction to Black Union soldiers

00:44:39:00

Chris Bonner:

For white Southerners, for the Confederate military, it was a source of rage to go to war and to see that they were fighting against Black men. The idea that there were Black soldiers in the U.S. Army was a marker, I think for a lot of white Southerners, of the reason they seceded, the danger that the United States seemed to pose to the racial order. And so we know, there are records during and after the Civil War, increasingly, there are records of the horrible destruction of African-American men in uniform at the hands of white Southerners.

CHRIS BONNER:

We know that at Fort Pillow in Tennessee, Black men tried to surrender and dozens were massacred after they had raised the white flag. We know that in 1864, the Confederacy enacts a policy that says that Black soldiers taken in battle would be treated as rebel slaves. And that would mean that they could either be punished or killed with impunity or sold into bondage.

CHRIS BONNER:

And so you can see for white Southerners, the depth of their racism, I think for lack of a better phrase, the depth of their conviction that Black men only belonged in the U.S. in bondage. You can also see for Black men, for Black soldiers, the really complex ways that going to war was an existential threat to them as people. Anyone could die in war, only certain people could die or

potentially be enslaved in war. And that was the threat, the danger that Black men faced, that Black soldiers faced.

Lincoln's 'house divided' speech

00:46:44:00

Chris Bonner:

June 16th 1858, Lincoln delivers a speech that comes to be known as the House Divided Speech. And I think part of what the Speech is doing is responding to the Dred Scott decision, responding to this feeling that the institution of slavery is threatening the North, that it is potentially expanding into Northern territory. Lincoln says, in short, that a house divided against itself cannot stand, that a nation cannot be half slave and half free.

CHRIS BONNER:

And I think he was heard at that time, or I think he might've been heard or read at that time as calling for a kind of compromise, that the nation divided cannot survive, that the nation has to find a way to unite. And I think that there's a way in which that's what Lincoln was always trying to do, was trying to sort of find the middle ground to bring together the United States into a functional path. But I think there's an interesting and there's an important way to read Lincoln's Speech as saying that the North and the South are fundamentally opposed, that the nation is half slave and half free, and it will not survive half slave and half free forever. What he says is that the nation is half slave and half free and eventually it must be all one thing or all the other.

CHRIS BONNER:

And so this speech is in some ways a kind of prophecy of the fracture, or the continued fracture of the United States. And a call, I think in some way is a call for anti-slavery Northerners, people like himself, to stand up and try to

challenge and contest the work of pro-slavery advocates and Southerners, people like Roger Taney, who are trying to spread slavery across the country. It's a call to action in some ways to ensure that the nation does not become all slave as Roger Taney wanted it to be.

The narratives of Frederick

00:48:57:00

Chris Bonner:

One of the things that Frederick Douglass did in the narratives that he wrote of his life was show in some ways, exhibit the horrors, the brutality of enslavement. There's a small piece where he writes in his first narrative from 1845, he writes about how cold it was when he was a child who didn't have shoes and who slept on a hard floor. And he says that the cold cracked his feet. And he does this thing where he sort of blurs time. He says that, "Right now, I have cracks in my feet so deep that the pen with which I'm writing this narrative could be laid in those cracks."

CHRIS BONNER:

And so he's sort of making sure that a reader understands that he, in 1845, writing the narrative as a fugitive slave and kind of as a free man, he is the same person who, as a child, was forced to sleep on a cold floor with no socks, no shoes, no warmth, no comforts of, you know, things we would typically think children were entitled to. There's a way for him to make sure a reader sees not only how brutal slavery was in the moment, but how its brutality creates legacies that endure. He bears the scars, bears the wounds of his enslavement.

CHRIS BONNER:

Frederick Douglass's most famous speech is probably and possibly the most famous speech aside from the Gettysburg Address, delivered by any American in the 19th century, is Douglass's speech from the 5th of July in 1852, where he asks this question, "What to the American slave is your 4th of July?" And I think that the power of that speech is that turn, right? That it is *your* 4th of July and not his, that it is not a holiday that he can enjoy, not a holiday to which he feels entitled, not a day to celebrate for him, because he knows that the freedom of the United States, *your* freedom, as he calls it, is a lie.

CHRIS BONNER:

One of the things that really sticks with me about that speech, it's kind of a small piece. And it's, you know, the big rhetorical move of saying that the 4th of July is yours and not mine is incredibly powerful. But there's a line toward the end of the speech where he says to the United States, he says "Beware, a horrible reptile is coiled in your belly and it's prepared to strike." And this is an image that I think really sticks with me as a statement of how deeply embedded slavery was in the United States and how multi-faceted the threat seemed to be. It's not only a threat, a danger to enslaved people. It's not only a danger, Douglass would have said, to slave owners who were potentially threatened with slave rebellion or with violence perpetrated by the people who they owned, it was a danger to the nation itself. It was a corruption within the country that needed to be removed and needed to be purged in order to allow or ensure that the country could survive. And so it's a really smart way of trying to convince many people to see that slavery was harmful to them, or potentially harmful to them.

"A rebellion that created a government"

00:52:31:00

Chris Bonner:

The winter of 1860 and 1861 was a time of profound national crisis. And one of the things that's interesting about Lincoln is that before he assumes the presidency, before he comes to D.C., he's kind of convinced that the whole thing will peter out, that, you know, South Carolina's out in front, and it's leading some of these other Deep South States out of the Union, but this won't last. Like cooler heads will prevail, things will settle down.

One of the things that's really notable about this winter though is that Deep South states were working to try to expand the rebel community. They were working to try to convince other States to join them by seceding from the Union. And so Southern states, Deep South states send Secession Commissioners out to other Southern States and they're basically making the argument that, the U.S. government, that President Lincoln is a fundamental threat to us and our way of life.

CHRIS BONNER:

And this is actually, you know, in the records of the Secession Commissioners, is probably the best evidence we have of white Southerners telling other white Southerners that the Civil War was about slavery and that the Civil War was not only about slavery, but also about white supremacy. A Commissioner from Alabama went to Kentucky and said that essentially Lincoln is a threat because he advocates racial equality. There is this specter, this horror of racial egalitarianism and Lincoln is the embodiment of that. Lincoln was, you know, as the phrase went, he was a “Black Republican.” He was a person who not only opposed slavery, but opposed white supremacy and promoted racial equality.

CHRIS BONNER:

And so these Commissioners are really going out and trying to convince other Southerners to embrace the rebellion, to reject Lincoln and to reject the

United States. And so this is a really profound crisis. This is not a thing that is going to be resolved easily. This is a moment when American people have fundamentally different ideas about what the future of the nation should be and what the future of the nation will be under a Lincoln presidency. People in the Deep South are convinced that Lincoln is a threat, and they're trying to make sure that others across the South share that view of him.

00:55:02:00

CHRIS BONNER:

I think that it's important and I think a number of historians have worked in recent years to write about the Confederacy as a rebellion to make sure that we don't suggest that it was a legitimate nation or a legitimate body of states that had removed themselves from the U.S. Lincoln's perspective throughout the war was this was an illegitimate rebellion and that the southern States were never really fully outside of the United States, despite the work that they did to put themselves outside of the U.S.

CHRIS BONNER:

At the same time that it's important to see the Confederacy as a rebellion, it's also really critical to see all the work that they did to try to make themselves a nation. So the Confederacy establishes a formal government. They draft a constitution that is very similar to the U.S. Constitution, but includes explicit protections for slavery, which is something that the U.S. Constitution never did. They create a government. There are large numbers of U.S. Congressmen who leave the U.S. Congress and ascend to positions in the Confederate government, including Jefferson Davis, who had been a senator from Mississippi and becomes the Confederate President. There is a lot of government structure being implemented in the South. The Confederate States of America was declared a nation. Whether it was actually an independent nation is a question for legal historians to debate, but it was a rebellion that created a government.

Fort Sumter

00:56:43:00

Chris Bonner:

In the winter and spring of 1861, Abraham Lincoln doesn't want to be the cause of war. He recognizes that, and he says he has an obligation to hold federal territory, including forts, even in southern states. And so, one of the sort of most prominent of these forts was Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor off the coast of South Carolina. There were Union troops stationed in Fort Sumter. There were Confederate guns lined up on the edges of the Harbor pointed toward the fort. Lincoln doesn't want to start a war, but he also wants to be sure that he shows himself as a sort of strong national figure, a military leader who will protect his troops.

CHRIS BONNER:

And so Lincoln sends in a supply ship to sail toward Fort Sumter. And we think that what he's doing here is really strategic. We think that Lincoln understands by April of 1861. He understands that there will probably be a war, that there will be some fighting, at least some skirmishing in the South. But he also really understands that he does not want to be the cause of the war. He does not want to be the precipitator of the violent conflict. And so he sends in the supply ship, I think with the expectation that the Southerners in Charleston will fire on the supply ship and will fire on the Union troops in Fort Sumter.

CHRIS BONNER:

This is what happens. The Confederates fire on the ship. They fire on the Fort. And after I think, 36 hours of bombardment, the Fort falls. The men in Fort Sumter surrender. What works out for Lincoln is that public sentiment in the

North has not really been ready for war. And in the aftermath of Fort Sumter, they are ready for war and they recognize in the North that the South fired the first shots. That the South initiated the actual violent conflict.

CHRIS BONNER:

So Lincoln was really careful, really strategic in terms of leading or sort of navigating the... To stretch the metaphor, the muddy waters of the early stages of secession and the coming of the Civil War. He didn't cause the war even if he might've done things to precipitate white southerners firing on Fort Sumter.

Lincoln's political strategy to solidify emancipation

00:59:18:00

Chris Bonner:

Well into 1862 Lincoln was saying that his primary obligation, his primary goal was to defend the Union. And if he could defend the Union by freeing all the slaves, he would do so. If he could defend the Union by freeing no slaves, he would do so. His primary drive was to preserve the United States as a united states. What happens in 1862 is that increasingly Lincoln sees the military value of emancipation as a policy. He sees that it will be useful for him to not only destabilize slavery in the South, but also to potentially arm enslaved men. And so, as 1862 progresses, as the war drags on, and really in 1862 goes poorly for the United States, Lincoln comes to see that it will be a really good strategy to try to enlist and emancipate African-Americans from the South. So what Lincoln's doing in this moment is sort of thinking about the military value of emancipation, the ways in which emancipation might help to win the war and to preserve the Union.

CHRIS BONNER:

What he really comes to do is to unite these projects of saving the Union and freeing the slaves. And the Emancipation Proclamation is a critical text to show the unity of those two projects. One of the things Lincoln says in the Emancipation Proclamation is that emancipation is military necessity. What he's saying there is that the war cannot be won unless enslaved people in rebel territory are emancipated. The war cannot be won, the Union cannot be reunited, the states cannot be fully understood as united once again unless emancipation takes place in the southern states. And so he is knitting together these projects of saving the Union and freeing the slaves in that document in 1862.

01:01:32:00

CHRIS BONNER:

Lincoln said and I think was sincere in saying that he thought slavery was morally wrong and that he hoped that people could be free. I think Lincoln was also very sincere in saying that he wanted to do what he felt was within his power as President. And early in his presidency he was very explicit about recognizing that he did not have the power to touch slavery where it already existed.

CHRIS BONNER:

The policy of emancipation, I think, was a convenient way for Lincoln to navigate the limits of his power as President. The Emancipation Proclamation was enacted or justified as an act of war by a commander in chief. It was also justified as an act by the executive branch in forcing congressional policies that were allowing enslaved people to secure their freedom by running to the Union Army. And so he's doing what he's doing in the Emancipation Proclamation because of his reconfigured understanding of what he was legally allowed to do as President. Those things happened to align with his oft stated moral sense that slavery was wrong.

CHRIS BONNER:

I think that we're not well-served in our understanding of Lincoln if we say that he was just finding a way to satisfy his moral desires. What he was doing was following the policies of people like Benjamin Butler, people like congress and of course, again, following the actions of enslaved people themselves, who were running to freedom. He was enforcing the actions of people who had come before him. He was taking his power as President to solidify emancipation as Union military policy, not to realize his sense of what was morally right. I think that fundamentally emancipation was about enforcing and securing what had been existing policies that were created in 1861 and 1862 on the ground.

The Gettysburg Address

01:03:51:00

Chris Bonner:

The Gettysburg Address was a brief, but I think really transformative speech. It was a speech that was designed to help people in the North reckon with the tremendous suffering, the tremendous bloodletting that the Civil War had produced. Massive numbers of people had died, including about 25,000 Union soldiers killed or wounded at Gettysburg, which had been the largest battle in the Civil War to that point. Largest and deadliest battle in the Civil War to that point.

CHRIS BONNER:

What Lincoln was doing in the Gettysburg Address was trying to help white northerners make sense of that death and that suffering. Make sense of the tragedy of the Civil War. And what he does, which is so elegant, is essentially say that all the deaths of these soldiers will be useful. The men will not die in vain if the nation works to realize the sort of ideals that are embedded in the

nation's founding documents. The ideal that all men are created equal, that people are entitled to liberty.

CHRIS BONNER:

And so what he says, and the key phrase in the Gettysburg Address is Lincoln's idea that the Civil War will create a new birth of freedom. What he means by that is that we have called ourselves a free country, but we are going to have a new birth of freedom when we as a nation enact and secure emancipation for the four million enslaved people in the South. When that is done, when that tremendous victory is realized, when those four million people are liberated, then the deaths of the men who died at Gettysburg and in all the other battles, those men's deaths will be worth a lot. They will be worth more than any sort of military deaths that have been seen in the U.S. to that point because they would really help to not only free millions of enslaved people, but to realize an ideal of the United States as a nation of freedom.

The myth of Lincoln as "the Great Emancipator"

01:06:05:00

CHRIS BONNER:

There's this myth of Lincoln as the "Great Emancipator." And I think that the idea is that Lincoln was the leading figure. He was the driving force behind the abolition, the eradication of slavery in the Civil War era. I think that that myth actually distracts from one of the things that was really great about Lincoln as a President and as a leader. When we see how emancipation happened as a set of practices enacted by enslaved people and by Union military officers and by Congress, and then taken up by Lincoln as President, what we see is that Lincoln was really listening to people around him. That he was responding well to the circumstances. That he was thinking critically and carefully about the policy of emancipation. Lincoln was not just out in front

saying, "Free the slaves." What Lincoln was doing, which I think was so really incredibly valuable was paying attention and thinking carefully about what was going on around him.

CHRIS BONNER:

And I think those are really wonderful qualities of a leader. Someone who will listen and pay attention and be thoughtful about people who have less power than he does. And so seeing how emancipation actually happened, I think gives us a better sense of what was so good about Lincoln as a President, that he was responsive to people around him. I think that there's a way to see emancipation as a set of policies that Lincoln enacted, a scroll that is handed out, that is gifted to enslaved people in the South.

01:07:54:00

CHRIS BONNER:

In truth, what Lincoln does in the Emancipation Proclamation is create a kind of doorway. He establishes a path for Black people to pursue to try to secure their own freedom. But all of the work that African-Americans did to get free was predicated on their choice to take the risk, to take the chance to leave slave owners, to leave what was familiar to run through the South and try to make it to the Union military.

CHRIS BONNER:

So Lincoln creates a doorway, but it's a doorway that's off in the woods, that's off on the coast, that is wherever the Union military is. Enslaved people have to take it upon themselves to leave where they are to find that doorway, and then to make their way through treacherous territory, through a literal war zone to try to secure that freedom. And so it's a profound danger that enslaved people were facing. And it was a danger that thousands took upon themselves in the effort to try to get away from bondage.

The 13th Amendment

01:09:06:00

CHRIS BONNER:

Lincoln and Republicans in Congress moved toward enacting the 13th Amendment or pursuing that 13th Amendment because they recognized and because they worried about the limits of the Emancipation Proclamation. The Emancipation Proclamation was an act of war. There was a concern that once the war ended, the status of people emancipated under that proclamation would be uncertain. There was a concern that for the thousands and maybe hundreds of thousands of people who had not secured freedom during the war, that their freedom might be uncertain without further legislative action. There was also the reality that there were hundreds of thousands of enslaved people in border States like Maryland and Kentucky and Missouri, who had not been freed by the Emancipation Proclamation because those were not rebel territories. And so Lincoln and congressmen moved toward the 13th Amendment because they want to broaden and solidify the policies of emancipation that were being enacted in the Civil War era.

CHRIS BONNER:

The 13th Amendment is really in some ways a product of the advocacy of radical Republicans in Congress, people who wanted to make the Civil War a moment of real transformation of the nation's economic, and in some ways, racial structures. And so they were out in front leading the charge toward a constitutional abolition of slavery.

CHRIS BONNER:

Lincoln was, as he was in many cases, sort of following up. He was coming behind and eventually coming to embrace the 13th Amendment as a policy. So, part of what drives Lincoln to this point is his feeling, his worries about

the limits of the Emancipation Proclamation. Part of what drives Lincoln to embrace the 13th Amendment is his concerns about his position for the election of 1864. He's worried that congressmen and that public opinion is moving toward real and more substantial legal change to abolish slavery.

CHRIS BONNER:

And so Lincoln sees the 13th Amendment as a thing that might help to consolidate the Republican party, help to bring it together and help to re-elect him as he's moving toward this sort of really difficult election in 1864. And so there's a political calculation in addition to the kind of moral calculation that Lincoln is making to solidify emancipation and to solidify his own position as president, his potential reelection as president, through the 13th Amendment.

01:11:49:00

CHRIS BONNER:

I think that the- the Emancipation Proclamation was really significant as a statement about a new meaning for the Civil War. The Emancipation Proclamation was less significant as a practical act of abolition. And so the 13th Amendment secures freedom for hundreds of thousands of more people, and really states definitively that the nation will no longer be defined by slavery, or should no longer be defined by slavery. And so that's the moment when the nation sort of comes to be a country that will be defined by free labor, at least theoretically. That is the moment when slavery is really abolished.

CHRIS BONNER:

The 13th Amendment says that slavery will be abolished in the United States. But one of the challenges of the 13th Amendment is that it's federal government policy. It's enacted and solidified in Washington D.C. And there

are enslaved people across the South, far away from the center of national government.

CHRIS BONNER:

So, one of the reasons that Juneteenth comes to be a holiday is that it's not until the middle of June in large parts of the South and in large parts of Texas where significant numbers of slave people, excuse me, enslaved people learn that the donstitution has declared them free. And so union officials come into a Texas town and announce the 13th Amendment. And essentially that ensures that enslaved people will be freed in that place.

CHRIS BONNER:

So there's a way to think about this as a mark or as a reflection of the limits of Constitutional change to actually make freedom a real thing. That there are people who live outside of the reach of the federal government, outside of the reach of government authority. And that government authority needs to spread. And that news needs to spread in order to ensure that slavery has ended.

The second inaugural address

01:14:00:00

Chris Bonner:

So one of the things that Lincoln says that's most profound to me and that sticks with me is the idea from the second inaugural address that if God would will that the war should continue until all of the wealth that slavery generated was lost. And all of the blood that was shed by the whips of overseers was shed by the guns and the cannons of soldiers. If God will that that would be the case then this would be just. Then the civil war would be a just repayment for the suffering of slavery.

CHRIS BONNER:

And so I think that this is a really incredible statement from a president about the foundational reality that slavery was injustice and the reality of what slavery actually meant to enslaved people. Slavery was not only the suffering of bodies. Slavery was not only the compulsion to labor. Slavery was the deprivation of opportunity. Enslaved people were denied access to the fruits of their labor for generations. And one of the things that Lincoln is sort of suggesting, I think, in this second inaugural address, by talking about the extensive injustice of slavery, I think what he's suggesting is that the U.S. government was responsible in some ways for rectifying that, for repaying the debt that is owed to enslaved people and really to the descendants of enslaved people for the horrific centuries of bondage and deprivation that slavery meant to African-Americans.

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