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LONNIE BUNCH III
LINCOLN'S DILEMMA
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Lonnie Bunch III Interview
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Interviewed by Jackie Olive & Barak Goodman
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Lonnie Bunch interview. Mark.

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Just a second.

Symbolism at the January 6 insurrection

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LONNIE BUNCH:

Well, on January 6th, as the insurrection was unfolding, the Smithsonian is really close to the Capitol. All the museums are there. And there was a moment where somebody sent me a picture of people carrying a Confederate flag on the way to the Capitol in front of the National Museum African-American History and Culture, and some people were very angry about it.

LONNIE BUNCH:

For me, it was a symbol that the museum will always be there as a symbol of resistance. It will always be there to remind Americans of a history that sometimes they don't want to discuss. And that in some ways it was a powerful moment for me to say, without that museum there, these people would not have to engage with this question of what does it mean to be an

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American? What does it mean to be African-American? What does it mean for our country to grapple with these issues? So for me that moment just reminded me why it was so important to have that museum on the National Mall.

LONNIE BUNCH:

Well, there's a photograph of the insurrectionists right by the Capitol, and one is standing next to a noose, the symbol of lynching. For me, this really symbolized both a lack of history, a lack of understanding history, but it also symbolized the pain. That this was often about race. That what this insurrection really was, was people trying to return to an America that existed 50 years ago, rather than the America of today, and so, to me, that symbol made it clear to me that these were people building on a tradition of terrorism that has always been used to suppress the Black community, to limit their expectations, and that lynch rope was really a symbol that reminded me of how long the struggle has gone on and how this really was a struggle for the soul of a nation.

The struggle for freedom continues

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LONNIE BUNCH:

Well, as a historian, it's clear to me that you can't understand who we are today without understanding the past. And looking at the era of Abraham Lincoln, whether it's the era of slavery or freedom or crafting expectations of what this country can be, that is really essential to understanding who we are today. So many of the conversations around Black Lives Matter, around George Floyd, and around January 6th, are really about helping people see that this is part of a long struggle, and that, in essence, the price for freedom in America is ever vigilance. And the notion that the country will get to the

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promised land of freedom is really something that says it's going to be a long struggle, and that's what the 19th century tells us, that it's the beginning of a long struggle that continues to this very day.

The Lincoln Memorial

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LONNIE BUNCH:

The Lincoln Memorial is one of the cornerstones of the National Mall. It was a memorial that was built and opened in 1922 to a segregated audience, and that memorial has become a symbol for so many people. I remember being a freshman in college at Howard coming down to the Lincoln Memorial, walking around it, reading the words, being inspired by the possibilities, but also being frustrated by the fact that that promise was still not delivered. And so, in some ways, the Lincoln Memorial has always been used as a place of protest, as a place to ask America, to demand America, to live up to its stated ideals. And I think that, for me, what's powerful about the Lincoln Memorial is that it will always be there to remind us of what could have been and should challenge us to try to live up to those ideals.

The story of Black America is the story of America

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LONNIE BUNCH:

Before I became secretary of the Smithsonian, I was the director of the National Museum of African-American History and Culture. And in 2005, I came back with a staff of one, no collections, no idea where the building would be, but a real commitment to build on the legacy of 100 years. People have worked for that museum since 1915. Civil War veterans came together and said, as the country celebrates the 50th anniversary of the end of the war,

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they forget that African-Americans played a major role in that. So that was a struggle that happened for 100 years, and my goal was to make people understand that this was both a story of a community, that it was a rich history that deserved to be told, people's lives mattered, people's stories mattered, but it was also a history that shaped us all.

LONNIE BUNCH:

The key was to not create an African-American museum for African-Americans, but rather to say that the story of this museum, the story of Black America, is the quintessential American story. It's the story that has shaped us all. If we want to understand our notions of citizenship, of freedom, of resiliency, of spirituality, where better to look than this community?

LONNIE BUNCH:

For me, this was really both about fulfilling an obligation to those generations before, but recognizing that this was an opportunity to change America, to create something that says the National Mall is where the world comes to understand what it means to be an American. And now, with that museum, we've changed the tenor intent of what it means to be an American.

For me, this was more than building a museum, it was really about building a structure, telling stories that could change a country, that could demand a country live up to its ideals, that would prod a country, but it would also be a place where you could better understand who we are today and point us towards a better future.

Contradicting views of Lincoln

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LONNIE BUNCH:

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What's important to understand about Lincoln is Lincoln is both a product of his time and he's a wonderful lens to look at the contradictions, to look at the challenges of that period. And I think that it's fascinating just to look at how we've thought about Lincoln over time. He was the "great emancipator;" freed the slaves, he was the martyred president who gave his life to move a nation forward. But then there have been questions about, well, was Lincoln really somebody that cared about slavery and the African-American community? There have been scholars who have said Lincoln was racist, Lincoln didn't care about these issues, that freeing the slaves were really just a sort of military necessity.

LONNIE BUNCH:

In many ways, what I find fascinating is that by looking at the way Lincoln has been depicted through the memories we have, it allows us to understand the contradictions in this country. It allows us to understand the challenges we face. And, in essence, what we're looking for is a useful and usable Lincoln. A Lincoln that allows us to sort of better understand that you can make profound change in a nation. Because remember, very few people thought slavery would ever end. Very few people were abolitionists. but yet Lincoln's efforts led to something that most people wouldn't believe. And so in a way, Lincoln's story, Lincoln's history, the way we use Lincoln in our memory, really tells us about the challenges the country still faces.

LONNIE BUNCH:

In essence, for me, the Lincoln story is both a story of possibility, but it's also a story of limits. It's also a story of an unfinished revolution. And I think that's the way I like to think about Lincoln – as a foundation for change, but not something that happened without the leadership of African-Americans, without the struggle of African-Americans. So he created a process that helped to lead to Emancipation, but Emancipation was really done on the backs of African-Americans.

Abolitionism

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LONNIE BUNCH:

I think that what's important to recognize is that the abolitionist movement was really a movement that was supported by very few, and even most of the abolitionists really didn't accept the notion of Black equality. But what you see is that the abolitionist movement, the struggle to demand slavery's end, is really pushed and generated by African-Americans.

LONNIE BUNCH:

Remember, many abolitionists in the 19th century really thought that African-Americans should go back to Africa, should be colonized somewhere. "If they're set free, they should leave this country." And it was African-Americans who said, that's not acceptable, that we will not support an abolitionist movement that desires to eliminate African-Americans once they gain their freedom.

LONNIE BUNCH:

The whole tenor of abolitionism changes because of African-Americans, but also because African-Americans are really essential to gaining their own freedom, whether it's the notion of self liberating, self emancipating, running away, actually striking blows for freedom, all of that changed what abolitionist was and all of that sort of gave an urgency to emancipation.

In essence, the notion that white abolitionists were the generator of the movement for freedom for African-Americans is really flawed. That freedom for African-Americans came from that community, it also came from the push by the free Black community. As you know, there were thousands of African-Americans who are free in the South and in the North, and they

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suffered rapid discrimination and segregation, so they also pushed for change in laws, change in status. So what you have coming together are African-Americans saying, we want to help define what “abolitionist” is. We want to help define what freedom means.

LONNIE BUNCH:

Well, in some ways, the story of abolitionism is much like the story of the Civil Rights Movement, that the notion was that it was one of the good stories of America, that good Americans came together to end the scourge of slavery. But what you don't see is that there are so many African-American men and women, and many of the women organized abolitionism in the local communities, in the schools, worked to help The Underground Railroad, and so what you now see is rather than a story that says poor, broken, scared Blacks were freed by noble whites. What you now understand is that The Underground Railroad movement was really a movement led and stimulated by African-Americans. Whereas when I was in school, it was always scared Blacks waiting for white underground railroaders to take them to freedom. What we really have is that on the one hand, you do have this amazing opportunity where some people do cross racial boundaries and come together for the greater good, but it has always been driven by Black determinations for freedom, Blacks desire to gain freedom any way they can, and a notion that by gaining freedom for African-Americans, you're creating freedom for all Americans.

The Underground Railroad

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LONNIE BUNCH:

The Underground Railroad was a disjointed system. It really was where people found ways to help the enslaved get their freedom. Whether it was

hiding people, giving them resources as they had days on the trail, whether it is connecting them to abolitionists in cities like Philadelphia or Newark or New York, so that when you got to these cities you had help to make the transition from slavery to freedom. The Underground Railroad really has been taken as one of the great feel good stories of America. That Americans came together, predominantly white Americans to help free the enslaved. And the story is that it really is a combination of multi-racial effort, but you see people, whether it is William Still in Philadelphia, who basically creates Vigilance Societies that help the newly arrived African-Americans adjust to urban life, adjust to freedom, or whether it's the leadership of Harriet Tubman, like many women leading people out of the South into areas of freedom at the great risk of their own lives. So that in a way, the Underground Railroad is an amazing story of migration, of people coming together. But it's also a story that has been co-opted as one that has been of one community helping another community, rather than see it as a multiracial endeavor.

Frederick Douglass

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LONNIE BUNCH:

Well, I think first of all, Frederick Douglass is just an extraordinary person. He's a person that didn't do it by himself, with his wife, with his family, with other abolitionists that helped him make that transition, but that Frederick Douglass was someone who had the opportunity to learn how to read at an early age. He's somebody who lived near the water and lived near ways that would allow him to sort of experience life, not just as a person in bondage on a plantation, he worked in Baltimore, but what is so powerful to me is that Frederick Douglass wasn't a self-made man, but he was somebody who took opportunities of working with other abolitionists, getting to know William Lloyd Garrison, recognizing that his future was tied to his ability to be an

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active abolitionists, to travel around the country, to help people understand the evils of slavery.

LONNIE BUNCH:

And Douglass was brilliant. He was able to articulate slavery in a way that made it real to his audiences. And he was quote "authentic." He was somebody who was in bondage. I think what's powerful about Douglass is his thirst to improve himself, his thirst to challenge a country. And the notion of first it's being speaking around the country, then it's recognizing "maybe I need to create a newspaper," a way to make sure that we're getting true stories, true facts, making sure that the issues he believes in are available for the public. And so I think Douglass really recognizes that he's got an opportunity to lead.

LONNIE BUNCH:

Now, he had an ego, he wanted to be the best, but as a result of that, Douglass is somebody who has a vision for multi-racial America. He's somebody who has the ability to speak to Lincoln, to the people of influence, and he is somebody who had a long life. So he was able to really be someone that could challenge the country first to end slavery, then to find fairness for African-Americans. So in some ways, Douglass is the clarion call of hope, of freedom, of possibility in the 19th century.

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LONNIE BUNCH:

I think it's important to recognize that Douglass is building on a foundation. There are free Blacks, there are abolitionist, Black and white that Douglass works with, learns from, but I think there's no doubt in my mind that Douglass saw himself as a figure that could change a nation. And that- what I think is so important about Douglass is he has a vision of a freer and fairer

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America, a vision that then really plays out throughout the late 19th century. It's not just about slavery, it's about fairness for Black people once they are free, it's about asking a country to be freer and fair.

LONNIE BUNCH:

So in many ways, what I think is so important about Douglass is, because of the longevity of his life, we get to see, we use him as a lens to understand what was possible, what were the challenges of race, and the fact that he was always that voice that demanded America to be fair, whether he demanded that of Lincoln or they demanded of every president that he lived with through the 19th century. But Frederick Douglass really was, I think, one of the most important people to shape the possibilities and define what America can be, not what America was.

LONNIE BUNCH:

In some ways, Douglass is very similar to almost every formerly enslaved African-American. There is a power that African-Americans had that they believed in a country that didn't believe in them, that they had an ability to dream a world anew, and Frederick Douglass was really at the leadership of that. I think part of it was his thirst for knowledge. Douglass talks about learning from other abolitionists, reading, spending time in Europe, looking at what freedom means in England or Ireland. And so, he had this global view and he recognized he had the power to use it. And he also knew how to use it, whether it was through the way he carried himself.

LONNIE BUNCH:

You know, Frederick Douglass was the most photographed person in the 19th century. So he understood how do you use technology in order to convey change, convey the argument that he wanted to make. So, in many ways, I think that Douglass really learned from many people, built on the relationships he had with other abolitionists, but had a singular sense that he

had a responsibility to demand, to challenge, to prod, but to envision a world anew.

Abolitionist women

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LONNIE BUNCH:

The story of women in the abolitionist movement, especially Black women, is little known and is unbelievably powerful. People like Frances Harper are brilliant because what they're able to do is take their own experiences and give voice to the experience of many others. Her poetry is so powerful – “bury me not in the land of the enslaved.”

LONNIE BUNCH:

For me, what you really see is that women play crucial roles in non-ascribed leadership. They're not the leaders of the anti-slavery movement, but they're essential. When you come into a city like Newark or Philadelphia, is Black women that help create these Vigilance Associations to give aid to the newly freed, to newly emancipated. And so I think people like Frances Harper are now being rediscovered because what they do is help us see a fuller picture of the enslaved experience, not just through the lens of the male. And I think that is really very powerful and very important.

Amanda Gorman and her predecessors

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LONNIE BUNCH:

I think that many Black women throughout our story, whether it is Frances Harper, whether it is- basically people like Mary McLeod Bethune and others,

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you see these women giving voice in a different way to the challenges and struggles that they feel. And so I think that what you see with Amanda is building on generations– she probably doesn't even know – but building on the fact that there's always been a desire, a need to articulate in variety of ways, what freedom means, what fairness means. And women have done that through poetry, through song, through traditional leadership. And so I think she is part of a long tradition of using her creativity, using her voice to challenge, to re-imagine, and to help a country be made better.

William Johnson

00:21:25:00

LONNIE BUNCH:

It's important to realize that although Lincoln lived in Springfield, Illinois, he had interactions with African-Americans. He had clients that were African-American in his legal practice, and he became associated, I'm not sure, I'm not going to say close to, but associated with people like... And so I think that what you see with Lincoln, you see a relationship, it's not just servant. It's not just, let me make your life easier. They became the ability share and talk to each other. And I think that one of the great strengths of Lincoln is that he begins to learn more about race, more about African-Americans based on his interaction with the African-Americans in his life. And I that's the role he plays.

LONNIE BUNCH:

So William Johnson is close to Lincoln and travels with him to places like Gettysburg for the Gettysburg address. So close to the obviously contract smallpox as Lincoln does and ultimately dies from it. But I think it's important that Lincoln needed people like Johnson to give him comfort, both

physical comfort, but also sort of intellectual comfort and spiritual comfort. So the kind of conversations they had, we don't know all about it, but my sense is that there were times that Lincoln would raise questions around race or around how do we survive this war we're in the middle of, and Johnson would help him grapple with these issues.

Lincoln learned through compassion

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LONNIE BUNCH:

Well, I think that Lincoln had a very interesting relationship with the African-American community. And that clearly as a person of his time he really believed in the racial inferiority of the African-American, but he also had personal encounters, and these personal encounters challenged his notions, made him rethink some of the basic assumptions that many white Americans had. And so, I think that what you see is also Lincoln is a person of great compassion. And Lincoln is a person who is moved by personal interactions. I'm always struck that when Lincoln would leave the White House and head to the summer cottage in Northwest Washington, he would pass many of the camps where the self-emancipated were. And there are many stories of Lincoln stopping to talk, learning about what it was like to be a Black woman who was enslaved. So in some ways, this notion of Lincoln having a thirst to understand something he didn't experience, but having the kind of compassion to talk to people who were enslaved, I think that also began to shape him because what it does is it makes slavery real. It makes the African-American experience palpable rather than something that is distant and removed. Lincoln had enough experiences so that when he thought about what emancipation meant, when he thought about what reconstruction was,

he had people whose lives, whose stories, whose memories helped shape him.

“Contraband” camps

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LONNIE BUNCH:

The term contraband really comes from the laws that allow the soldiers to take the enslaved as “contraband property,” to allow them to be taken away from the people that quote on them. And it then became the way to describe, rather than say, “self-emancipated” or “free Blacks,” it became a way to describe those thousands of the enslaved people who fled to Union lines, who demanded that the country find new ways to grapple with their self emancipation. And “contraband” really became a way to define them. But it also, in my mind, continues the sense that when you talk about the slave, you dehumanize them. When you talk about the “contraband,” even if they are free, they are still not equal. They're still not full humans. And so I think that's part of the way it allowed Americans to feel comfortable that you are dealing with people that you quote help free, but they're not your equal. They're the “contraband.”

LONNIE BUNCH:

And I think what is so important about that is first of all, the notion that the self emancipation of African-Americans forces the government to change, forces the government, to think about laws in different ways, think about how their experience, think about how to use the “contraband,” these new self emancipated. But I think it also, the stories that don't get told are about how horrible those camps were, the number of people in these camps who died of disease, the kind of sexual abuse that occurred there, that these were not oasis of freedom. They were really camps where you try to limit the impact

on the broader society of these people. And many of them suffered and died. Many of them were used as labor for the Union army. So in some ways, “contraband” is a horrible word, but it's almost an inappropriate word because they were not seen as human. They were really seen as property to fulfill the needs of the country.

LONNIE BUNCH:

But it's also when you call people “contraband,” remember we're talking 1863, 1864, that gives you a space not to think about what freedom really means. It gives you a space not to think about what does it mean for these humans who have self emancipated going forward in this country? So in a way, “contraband” tamped down some of the need to grapple with what it meant to deal with a newly freed population. Well, there were literally hundreds of “contraband” camps around the country. As the self-emancipated came to the Union lines, came to cities that were now under the control of the Union, people didn't know what to do with them, and they put them in these camps. And as I said, these camps were a source of labor for the military for the Union. But these camps were also overcrowded. They were haphazard. And there were attempts to bring some water. There were camps in Mitchellville, South Carolina on the outerbanks of North Carolina that had certain kinds of construction to give people protection from the weather. But on the other hand, what you had are people in these camps who lived in tents. And so what you have is a place that is both ripe with hope and optimism, but also ripe with disease, death, and frustration. So in some ways, these camps are really both a place where the bubbling up of freedom is, but they're also a place where people recognize the limits of freedom as well.

The importance of education

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LONNIE BUNCH:

It really is part of the number one thing, African Americans demanded. And that was the opportunity to educate both themselves, but especially their children. There was something very powerful about how during the war, how during reconstruction, the number one thing, besides freedom that the self-emancipated wanted was education for their children. And this has really been foundational for African-Americans.

LONNIE BUNCH:

When you look at the conversations that even occurred on the plantations, there were really two. One was always about freedom. And the other was always about education, whether it was learning to read, whether it was the doors that would open, the possibilities that one could only re-imagine if you were educated. So you see this thirst, and what is so important is that this need to educate, to find opportunities for education pushes the federal government to think about creating schools in these camps and beyond, it pushes the community of religious scholars and religious communities to give money, to provide education. So that essence, education becomes the passport to tomorrow for so many of the African-Americans.

Revoking Frémont's proclamation

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LONNIE BUNCH:

What really undergirds Lincoln's response to Frémont's proclamation is that Lincoln is terrified about losing more of the border states, to make sure that there are places that still have slavery, but that could support the Union. And he knows that if Frémont's proclamation is maintained, it's going to create this sort of bubble, this unrest, this concern in the border states. But also I think that Lincoln's thinking hadn't evolved to emancipation then. By 1861 Lincoln's desire is to keep the Union together. If you keep the Union together

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with freeing the enslaved, fine, if you keep the Union together without freeing the enslaved – that was important. So what Lincoln was concerned about was that this was getting ahead of where he was. And I think the use of the word “political” really is fascinating because part of what Lincoln does is he expands the power of the presidency.

LONNIE BUNCH:

He controls the military in a way presidents hadn't before. So this was really a step in linking, exercising, the fact that he felt the president had the responsibility to make decisions about war, about freedom. And what you see by the end of Lincoln's term is an expansion of presidential power. And this is one of the moments where he does that. So this proclamation was ahead of Lincoln. It may have put ideas in Lincoln's head, further down the road, but the key was he was trying to make sure that he could maintain as much of the Union as possible during 1861, 1862.

LONNIE BUNCH:

I don't think he came into the office thinking about it – his priority was keeping the Union together. Lincoln was concerned, like many of the Republicans in the 1850s, concerned about the extension of slavery into the territories, concerned about the growing power of the South. And I think emancipation really becomes something that Lincoln has brought to later. It's reading what things at Frederick Douglass writes, it's hearing abolitionists, it's recognizing how emancipation is both a act of fairness, but also an active military necessity. So for Lincoln in 1861, it's about how do I preserve the Union the best I can? And freedom for the enslaved is something that I think he develops later in his presidency.

Lincoln's gradual evolution toward emancipation

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LONNIE BUNCH:

I think Lincoln begins to look towards emancipation in 1862. He's beginning to sort of engage with more of the "contraband," the self emancipated. He's beginning to think about, "What do you need to ensure victory?" And part of that is limiting the labor supply of the South. Part of that is recognizing down the road that the Union's is going to need more soldiers to participate in this struggle. And so I think that you see a gradual... I mean, I think that Lincoln gradually came to this moment. You look at Lincoln and early in his tenure, he's saying, "I don't want to think about emancipation." He begins to then think about, "Well is it colonization, if we set people free, can we move them outside of the country? Is it compensated emancipation? Do we pay people to free their enslaved people?" So I think you see Lincoln grappling with all the possibilities, but I think he ultimately evolves to emancipation later in his presidency.

Lincoln's unprecedented situation

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LONNIE BUNCH:

I think that Lincoln recognized that he was in an unprecedented situation. He was in a war. He was trying to think about bringing a country together, but thinking about the future after the war. So I think all of that made Lincoln think in ways that other presidents had not, didn't have to. So in some ways Lincoln brings his own creativity, his own sense of fairness, but he also brings the sense that he's in an unbelievably difficult and unprecedented situation. The country is in peril. So he's got to think in different ways, "How do you protect that country?" So I think that part of the evolution is a natural evolution of Lincoln's thinking. But part of it is the realities of war really also forced Lincoln to think in ways different than his predecessors.

Enslaved people demanding freedom

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LONNIE BUNCH:

First of all, we have to remember that during the Civil War, what you have are thousands of enslaved people demanding freedom, self-emancipating, but they're also bringing a challenge. What does it mean now that you have these people that you quote, call "contraband?" What does it mean to the federal government? How do we use them? How do we think about their future? So in some ways, the war and the notion of enslaved finding their own freedom, all of that is really what pushes Lincoln, what pushes Congress to begin to change, to make sure that they can adapt to the circumstances they faced.

LONNIE BUNCH:

There's no one in 1860 that thought about where they'd be in 1863. And I think it's this sort of change, it's this challenge of the moment. But I also want to undergird how important African-Americans are to this. It is abolitionists like Frederick Douglass who are giving voice to a new way to think about America, to think about a multi-racial America. It is the enslaved who are flooding Union lines that are forcing people to recognize that they are demanding a change. And we're going to, as a nation, have to adjust to that change. So that what you see is in my mind, the push of war and the pull of self-emancipation, sort of leading the nation, leading Lincoln to think in different ways to try to solve this challenge.

William Cooper Nell

00:37:14:00

LONNIE BUNCH:

What often happens is that the light of Frederick Douglass blocks other people's stories, William Cooper Nell is a brilliant abolitionist who really

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brings a lot of thought to what emancipation really should look like. He was a political thinker, a strategist. What I think is so important about Lincoln is, Lincoln is willing to take advice from many quarters. He's willing to find sources, whether they're biblical sources, sources of people who have given speeches, working with his own cabinet. And so I think that as with the emancipation Lincoln is looking to fight to get it right. And he's looking to hear from a variety of quarters to do that.

LONNIE BUNCH:

But I think it's also important to recognize that there were many people around Lincoln who thought he was moving too quickly, even then. And so I think one of the great strengths of Lincoln is recognizing that this is something that he thought could be transformative, both in terms of the enslaved, but also in terms of the country. So he went to people like Nell to basically hear ideas and he brought those together as part of the Emancipation Proclamation.

The Fort Pillow Massacre

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LONNIE BUNCH:

One of the interesting challenges that Lincoln and the country faced is the role of African-Americans in the military. As the Emancipation Proclamation gains sense of here are ways to help African-Americans gain their freedom, there's also a desire because Lincoln needs soldiers. White soldiers are not as excited about the war. There's a draft in 1863, that leads to real horrible riots that people attack African-Americans in New York, attack soldiers in New York. So what Lincoln needs are bodies who are going to also contribute. And there's great debate around whether African-Americans are effectual as soldiers, would they fight? And when Blacks were brought into the Union Army, the Confederacy reacted in a horrible way. They said that, "They will

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not allow Black soldiers to surrender. They will not give them the quarter, how dare the Union, insult them by giving their former enslaved guns, weapons?" So what you have are you have Black soldiers fighting throughout the war, but then at Fort Pillow, in Tennessee, you have a small garrison of Union troops who had taken a Fort that was once housed the Confederate Army. A general, Nathaniel Bedford Forrest led this fight. Ultimately, as the Confederates began to- dominated Fort Pillow, as soldiers began to surrender, suddenly hundreds were massacred, especially Black soldiers who were not given the right to surrender. And that was seen as a blow to the Union by the Confederacy to say, "This is what will happen if you continue to use Black soldiers."

LONNIE BUNCH:

But it really also becomes a rallying cry on several levels. First of all, it becomes a thing where Black soldiers begin to say, "We will fight to remember Fort Pillow. We will use our abilities to challenge the Confederacy." But it also forces people like Lincoln to think about how do you protect these Black troops? And while there really wasn't the kind of formal policy, there was a sense that, if we could capture the people who did this, they would be punished. And it was really people like Frederick Douglass, who demanded that you have to both protect the soldiers and you have to pay them equally. And so Fort Pillow becomes this sort of rallying cry, but it also becomes an example of the way violence was always used against African-Americans. And the fact that the general who led this ultimately became one of the founders of the Ku Klux Klan in 1867, tells us that this was really about terrorism and violence. That has always been part of the system of slavery, and here was just another example of it.

LONNIE BUNCH:

What you see is, as people are surrendered, sometimes they're shot down indiscriminately. Literally sort of two-thirds of all the people who were

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murdered at Fort Pillow were African-American. While there were some White soldiers, the violence was really projected at the African-American soldier. And the notion was that this was going to prevent other African-Americans from joining, because they'll know what happened at Fort Pillow. And the reality was the opposite that it inspired people to challenge the Confederacy and to recognize as Frederick Douglass said, "Once you shed blood for a nation, freedom has to follow."

Lincoln's Assassination

00:42:38:00

LONNIE BUNCH:

Well Lincoln's death is really a moment that's transformative for the nation. He is the first president to be assassinated. And so there's this sense that so close to the end of the war, that what this was in the minds of many was this was God's retribution. That Lincoln sort of shed his blood in part because of this horrible war that occurred. And that what you see is in the South, a sense of it's the right thing to have happened. But in the North, you see this amazing outpour of anger, of hurt. You immediately go from a nation that was divided about Lincoln, many Northerners weren't all that supportive, what Lincoln wanted to do to suddenly Lincoln being the martyred hero. And what it is that as Lincoln begins to be going back to Springfield through Baltimore and New York, you see the country turnout. You see people mourning, and it really does establish many of the rituals, a mourning that happens for other presidents in the 20th century. What to me about this is that it really gave the Republican Party power to really try to implement its own vision of what the future would be, what Reconstruction was. Because Lincoln now was seen as somebody whose ideas were so important that he sacrificed his body, his soul, for the rest of the nation. So it gave the Republicans more power, and it really began the ability of many people to create St. Abraham Lincoln. And so that's what happens as he moves back to Springfield.

Frederick Douglass' relationship with Lincoln

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LONNIE BUNCH:

Frederick Douglass had an interesting relationship with Abraham Lincoln. Obviously they meet for the first time in 1863, where Douglass is challenging Lincoln, asking him to protect Black troops, to treat Black troops more fairly. Lincoln invites Douglass to the second inaugural address. So when Douglass begins to say what an important address that was, what you see is that when Lincoln is killed, Douglass is concerned, upset because he recognized that for all of Lincoln's flaws and hesitancy, he moved the process along further than any other president would have. And so there was this real sense of mourning of loss, of uncertainty, of where the country would be. And so initially Douglass is sort of right in line with sort of the country saying, "We've lost the great emancipator."

LONNIE BUNCH:

But I think Douglass always knew that Lincoln had flaws, that Lincoln was not the "great emancipator." And you see Douglass over time, really challenging and puncturing this myth of the perfect Lincoln. When Douglass speaks at the unveiling of the Lincoln statue, 20 years after Lincoln's death, what you see is Frederick Douglass being really clear by saying that, "Lincoln was the president of white people, but he did some things that helped Black people." But what Douglass was concerned about is Lincoln's legacy, which could have moved more fairness towards an African-American community was cut short and Douglass was very concerned about whether or not that legacy would really be built upon. And his attitudes towards Lincoln evolves as he worries about what happens with reconstruction?

So in many ways, Douglass is really both someone who initiates, helps to initiate the notion of the martyrred of Lincoln, but he was also realistic enough to know to challenge Lincoln and to make sure that Lincoln's death is used to change the nation, not just to celebrate Abraham Lincoln.

The role of federal government in abolition

00:46:59:00

LONNIE BUNCH:

Abolitionists, White abolitionists, were part of a community that Blacks enslaved and newly freed would sort of work with. Because the notion was that African-Americans who in North, most of them could not vote, didn't have sort of political power – you needed to work with people and you needed to turn to the federal government for support. And one of the things that Lincoln symbolizes, it begins this belief among the African-Americans, that it is the federal government that you can turn to because the federal government has the power. The federal government can battle Southern racism.

LONNIE BUNCH:

And so what you see is the community turning to the federal government, turning to a few leaders in Congress to recognize they have the ability to change the direction of a community. And so what you see is Blacks always, with people like Frederick Douglass and others, always defining what that political agenda should be, what that legislative agenda should be, what Reconstruction would be. And so what you see is a partnership, but it really was tied to the federal government being the one place, because of Abraham Lincoln, that African-Americans felt they could turn to in times need and could trust.

The end of the war

00:48:28:00

LONNIE BUNCH:

Clearly it's a day of jubilee, right? There is a sense that there's a new America, that for the enslaved, the idea of freedom, which has always been so powerful now is made real. And now the question becomes, what does freedom mean? How do you transition a nation from 400 million people who were in enslaved to suddenly these new freed men and women? And so what happens at the end of the war is both joy, but there is also concern, what does this really mean? And there's no blueprint and with Lincoln's assassination, they're not even sure what the federal government is going to do.

LONNIE BUNCH:

As Andrew Johnson becomes a president, there's a concern, what will freedom really look like? And so what you see is great joy, great hope, but great concern because they're really going into a period of transition and nobody knows what was going to happen in 1865.

The reality of freedom

00:49:45:00

LONNIE BUNCH:

Well, the question really is, you have now gained freedom, and what does freedom mean? Remember, most enslaved had never been more than 20 miles away from where they lived in the South. So what you find are some African-Americans who immediately say, "I'm leaving. I want to leave the plantation, I want to head north, head west, but want something different." You then see others who spend really 20 or 30 years trying to reconnect with family. One of the most powerful things are, you'll see letters in Black

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newspapers, letters to the Freedmen's Bureau saying, "I was enslaved. I was sold from my mother. Can you help me find her?" You see a lot of people setting off trying to find their family. And then you see others who are unsure of what freedom means and so they stay. They develop different relationships with former owners and so you really have a variety of ways African-Americans move to freedom. But the most important thing is that they, whether they stay or move, all recognize, all demand, that they are treated differently, that they are now free.

Juneteenth

00:51:12:00

LONNIE BUNCH:

I had never heard of Juneteenth growing up. I think that Juneteenth is both initially a local ceremony. Juneteenth is when the enslaved in Galveston hear that freedom has come. And so it becomes this first Texas celebration of freedom coming to Texas. But also what you realize is African-Americans really didn't have a freedom celebration. In the 19th century, the number one holiday for African-Americans was really Watch Night, when the Emancipation Proclamation came on January 1, 1863. There were always Emancipation Day parades in Philadelphia and New York and in small towns around the country, but they were really disconnected.

LONNIE BUNCH:

It's really Juneteenth that begins to come together, really after the civil rights movement. You begin to see African-Americans around the country saying, "How do we celebrate freedom?" Juneteenth becomes that way for people to celebrate freedom, because I think that what African-Americans, what Americans undervalued is just how traumatic, how amazing freedom was.

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What I love about Juneteenth is that it celebrates that moment when a community is no longer what it once was. Juneteenth in my mind is a powerful way for all, not just who are tied to Texas, but for all to understand both the importance of freedom, the fragility of freedom, and the fact that the fight for freedom is an everlasting struggle.

The hopes of emancipation

00:53:07:00

LONNIE BUNCH:

You have people who say emancipation is the freedom of movement. You have others who say that emancipation means, "I want education. I want to own land. I want to control my own labor." There are real desires that people want out of emancipation. Others want simple ... The opportunity to raise families. What you see are a variety of desires within the African-American community. Some want to have land. All the conversations about the distribution of land and how that could go, "Where's my 40 acres and my mule?" But you also have many who simply want to make sure their children get educated. There are a variety of things that emancipation means, but what I think more than anything else, emancipation means the hope that you can control your own destiny, the hope that you can control your own family, the hope that you can live a life that was better than the life you once had.

Citizenship

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LONNIE BUNCH:

As you look during what we call the Reconstruction Era and you look at the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendment. The 13th Amendment obviously ending

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slavery, the 15th amendment giving African-Americans the right to vote, in essence the way to protect their freedom. It's the 14th Amendment that really ensures Blacks are citizens, have the rights of citizenship, have due process. I don't think anybody in the African-American community, in the enslaved community, talked about citizenship, but what they talked about was the ability to protect freedom, the ability to redefine themselves as Americans, if not equal, Americans that have equal access, equal access to justice.

Citizenship becomes really important as a way to protect freedom.

LONNIE BUNCH:

Citizenship becomes integrated with the notion of, citizenship with the vote gives you the ability to protect this newly fragile thing called freedom. I think that it's really very powerful and it becomes obviously even more important, moving beyond the Civil War and Reconstruction that citizenship really gives the African-American community the ability to demand fairness. So much of the struggle of the 19th and early 20th century is about saying how do we ensure that the rights of citizenship are given to the entire community, including Americans who are African-American?

LONNIE BUNCH:

Lincoln struggled to ratify the 13th amendment in my mind talks about Lincoln's evolving towards citizenship. You can't free people without determining what does freedom really mean? In Lincoln's mind that meant having the right of citizenship, having the right to vote. I think you see Lincoln beginning to redefine what America is through an African-American lens.

Second inauguration

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LONNIE BUNCH:

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Lincoln's second inaugural in my mind does something really powerful, it positions once and for all the centrality of slavery in the Civil War. No longer can there be a debate, was the Civil War about states' rights. Lincoln makes it clear it's about slavery and he makes it clear that because of the cost of slavery to the enslaved, that the country owes something and that in a way, part of the blood that's being shed by others is because we owe it to that community. That to me is so important about what the second inaugural does, is slavery is central not just to the Civil War but it's central going forward to redefining what America is.

The importance of land ownership

00:57:19:00

LONNIE BUNCH:

There are real debates about how can you be free if you don't have the ability to control your life economically. There's this real desire for African-Americans to have land ownership. There were attempts, several different ones, where there were desires to give African-Americans land, sometimes 40 acres, sometimes land over the Sea Islands of South Carolina and Georgia. The goal was, in the minds of many, is that freedom without economic opportunity is too fragile, but yet the desire to really redistribute land was really never there. And really, by the end of Reconstruction most of the land that was given to African-Americans was given back to white ownership so that one of the weaknesses of freedom was not giving economic opportunities for the newly emancipated.

Different views of Reconstruction

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LONNIE BUNCH:

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There are great debates about what freedom means and how does the country adapt to the four million people who were once enslaved. Reconstruction is really the way that the country is going to change and provide new ways for this community to be part of the American experience. But there are different views of Reconstruction. Lincoln's view was that if 10% of Southern whites who fought in the war pledged an oath of loyalty to the country that they can begin the process of returning back into the Union. He wanted to protect the rights of the enslaved, partly through the amendments that were winding their way through the system. You had, when Lincoln is dead, when Lincoln is murdered, Andrew Johnson becomes president and he wants to return things back closer to the way they once were. He has no interest in the Black community, about their rights and freedom.

LONNIE BUNCH:

And then you have Radical Reconstruction, which I call the reconstruction of fairness and possibility. But you have a Reconstruction where the Republicans after Lincoln's murder recognize that we have to do more, one to ensure the rights and freedoms for the enslaved, but candidly to ensure the power of the Republican party. You have in Radical Reconstruction – you divide the South up into military districts. You use the military to guarantee rights for African-Americans to protect them. You pass something called the Freedmen's Bureau, which was really to help Black and white southerners in this transition from slavery to freedom, but it really became this place where African-Americans could go to receive education, to have labor contracts, to basically have some of the protections of the federal government.

LONNIE BUNCH:

But what happens is that there is an immediate backlash to Reconstruction. You begin to see a system of terrorism and intimidation where you see people actually trying to limit Black political participation, economic opportunity.

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There's lynching, there's violence almost throughout the South, and what you have is in essence a guerrilla warfare going on. At some point, what happens is that this desire to change the South becomes something that wears on the rest of the country. People are saying, "How long do we have to do this? What does this really mean for us?" And also there was less interest in supporting the change for African-Americans.

LONNIE BUNCH:

What you have is a violent insurrection internally in the South trying to destroy Reconstruction. You have a wariness in the North, and ultimately you have the Compromise of 1877 where in order to elect a Republican president the agreement was that the military would leave the South, and in essence return the South to the hands of many of the same whites who were there before the Civil War. What you have is a missed opportunity, that Reconstruction is really the opportunity to transform the nation, to try to create a nation where citizenship matters to all. And what you have is an insurrection that destroys that time of possibility and hope.

Edmonia Lewis

01:02:19:00

LONNIE BUNCH:

Edmonia Lewis is like many people who want to bring creativity to this moment. Edmonia Lewis is somebody who has native and African blood and she's a gifted sculptor, and she creates sculptures of native people but powerful sculptures about freedom with broken chains, for example. A lot of her work is in places like the Smithsonian American Art Museum. I think what's important is, people used all of their creativity to redefine what the experience should be for African-Americans, to remember the fragility of freedom and remember the power of Emancipation, and Edmonia Lewis is one of those people that does that.

Myths about the Civil War

01:03:15:00

LONNIE BUNCH:

As historians, we call this that the North won the war but lost the peace. In many ways, what you see is a conscious effort immediately after the war of returning the South to the way it once was to create a “Lost Cause” that this was in essence their version of Camelot. What you see happening, and it's really led often by white Southern women, the Daughters of the Confederacy, they begin to think about – how do you change the narrative? How do you memorialize these stories? Suddenly people like Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson are not people who were traitors who lost the war, they were heroes fighting for a “lost cause.” That notion really resonated with the South, it brought many Southerners together, but it also resonated with the North that this was really ... And it led to the myths that this was not a war about slavery but a war about brother fighting brother, trying to understand what the United States should be.

LONNIE BUNCH:

In essence, what you see now throughout history, but especially today, is a real need to reckon with those myths, to reckon with the fact that Confederate statues are about white supremacy, not about really the Civil War. To recognize that the challenge is to no longer celebrate the Confederacy as a noble cause, but to help people recognize that if the country is going to heal, if the country is going to find true understanding, then the country has got to really look at its past and shine a bright light on all those dark corners, and to basically say that the Confederacy lost the war. How do we make sure that we tell a truer history so that people can understand that there has been a sometimes quiet insurrection throughout the last 150 years of people trying to undermine Black progress, undermine helping the country live up to

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its stated ideals. That's a struggle that's going to happen for many years to come.

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