

# KUNHARDT **FILM** / FOUNDATION

MICHAEL BURLINGAME  
*LINCOLN'S DILEMMA*  
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**Michael Burlingame Interview**  
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**Interviewed by Jackie Olive & Barak Goodman**  
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CREW MEMBER:

Professor Michael Burlingame interview. Take one. Marker.

## **The challenge facing Lincoln as he takes office**

00:00:14:00

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

Well, as Lincoln prepares to board the train that will whisk him to Washington, he faced a crisis unlike any previous president. The nation was falling apart, that seven states had pulled out of the Union, other states threatened to pull out of the Union. The incumbent president was saying, "Well, it's unconstitutional for those states to pull out of the Union, but we can't do anything about it," and Lincoln was furious with him, because he thought that President Buchanan was basically saying, "Dear God, don't let it happen on my watch. And let this other guy have the responsibility on his hands."

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

So it was a terrible challenge that Lincoln faced, because he hoped that he could keep the eight slave states in the Union and not join the other seven slave states who had pulled out of the Union. And so he faced this challenge of threading the needle, as it were. On the one hand, he had to be conciliatory in order to keep the eight slave states who were still in the Union, staying in the

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Union. On the other hand, he had to stick by his anti-slavery principles and keep his party united. And so if he was too conciliatory, he would alienate the Republican Party, and if he was not conciliatory enough, he would alienate the eight slave states that stayed in the Union. So it was a very difficult challenge that he faced.

## **The cause of secession**

00:01:46:00

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

Well, the Southern states that pulled out of the Union objected to Lincoln not so much because of who he was, that his personality was not inflammatory, that he was regarded as a fairly reasonable fellow personally, but the party that he stood for was committed to ending slavery, and he was a very outspoken champion of the anti-slavery plank of the Republican platform. And so the general thought was, well, no matter how nice a guy he may be, his party is going to, with him at its head, is going to insist that slavery be put on the road to ultimate extinction, and therefore we will not tolerate that.

## **The Crittenden compromise**

00:02:30:00

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

Well, the possibilities for compromise by the time Lincoln boarded that train to whisk him off to Washington seemed pretty remote. Lincoln himself was willing to make some concessions. For example, he said, "I would be willing to support a compromise amendment to the Constitution, which says that the federal government shall not interfere with slavery in the states." And that was relatively easy for him to make, because he thought that was a tautology that, that was already built in. Anyway, so he would make that gesture. And

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then he would say, if need be, that he would encourage the states to repeal their, or at least to modify their personal liberty laws, which allowed fugitive slaves to be protected from their pursuers.

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

And so he was willing to make some concessions, but those were not nearly enough for the Deep South. They insisted that you had to stop criticizing slavery, you had to allow slavery to go into every territory that existed in the United States and every territory that the United States might acquire. And so he resisted what was known as the Crittendon Compromise, which would have divided the nation by an east-west equator south of which slavery would be allowed to go, north of which it couldn't go. But south of it included not only the territory that already was part of the Union, but also Mexico, the Caribbean, Central America, and Lincoln and many of his party believed that if we accepted that compromise, it would allow slavery to expand into Mexico and Central America and the Caribbean, and it would be a calamity.

## **Compensated emancipation**

00:04:23:00

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

Well, as Lincoln is about to assume the presidency, he believed that the best way to emancipate the slaves, a cause to which he was deeply committed from early on, Lincoln hated and loathed and despised slavery from the time he was young, but he felt that the most reasonable way to go about emancipating slaves was by having states do that, that it was widely assumed that the federal government couldn't tell states to emancipate slaves. Slave states could do that if they wanted to, which is what had happened north of the Ohio River and what was actually north of the Mason-Dixon line, that all the states north of the Mason-Dixon line: Pennsylvania, New York, New

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Jersey, and New England, had abolished slavery through their state governments, mostly through their state legislatures and sometimes through their state courts. So what Lincoln hoped to do was to encourage slave states, particularly the border slave states, that is Kentucky, Maryland, Delaware, and Missouri, to abolish slavery on their own.

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

And as President, he had a plan, which was to encourage the slave states to do that by offering to compensate the slaveholders. Because Lincoln believed that slaveholders didn't invent the institution of slavery, slaveholders had invested a lot of money. The average cost of a slave in those days would be roughly the average cost of a new car for us today. The average slave-holding was eight, so that represented a fair chunk of change, and so that slaveholders should be compensated, and that would be one of the major obstacles to emancipation was the fear that they would lose their money. And if they got their money, Lincoln thought that would facilitate emancipation.

And then once the states in the border region, that is Kentucky, Maryland, Delaware, and Missouri, they did that, then the states immediately adjacent: Virginia, Tennessee, and Arkansas, they would do it too. And then the states below that, that had pulled out of the Union, they would realize that they couldn't make a go of it. They weren't numerous enough to form a really viable new nation, and that they would come back into the Union.

## **Lincoln's commitment to the Union**

00:06:39:00

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

Whether Lincoln would trade the Union for emancipation didn't occur at that point. It would occur in 1864 when he was tempted, but he did not succumb to that temptation. He insisted that emancipation was a sine qua non . And

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there's something that needs to be said about Lincoln's desire to preserve the Union, that's oftentimes thought as a rather unworthy cause in and of itself, just to preserve a nation for the sake of its preservation, but Lincoln said, "No, no, no." And within three weeks of his inauguration, his assistant personal secretary, John Hay, comes into the office, says, "Mr. President, the mailbag is bulging with appeals to you to issue an emancipation proclamation." And Lincoln said, "Well, that's an important issue, to be sure, but I think that most important issue that we face is to prove that popular government is not an absurdity. If we fail to prevail in this war, it will go far to discredit the idea of popular government throughout the world." And so we oftentimes think of the war as either to preserve the Union or to abolish slavery, but to Lincoln, it was something more. It was those things, to be sure; those were important, but above all that was vindicating democracy to show the rest of the world that you could have a large number of people participate in their governance and it would still work. It would be not just a philosopher's dream, but a living viable reality.

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

Lincoln regarded the war as a war to preserve and vindicate democracy, the notion that a large number of people can participate in their governance and that government would really work. It's practical and viable.

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

Lincoln's nationalism was rooted in a sense that the United States was an exceptional nation. And one of the reasons it was exceptional was that it allowed a great number of people, common ordinary people, not an elite, to participate in their governance, and that it not only provided them a mechanism for formal democracy, but also what we might call social democracy. And that what Lincoln was particularly fond of emphasizing when he talked about the stakes of the war, was that this was a war to preserve a nation where people could go as far as their talent and their industry and

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their ability and their virtue would take them, that there were no artificial barriers, that everybody should have a fair chance at the starting line in life, and that everybody should have a fair chance as they conducted the race of life. And he himself had come from very modest circumstances, of course, and so he was a living example of here's a nation where you can come from being dirt poor, ignorant, uneducated formally, and rise to positions of immense power and authority.

## **Lincoln working for his father**

00:09:32:00

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

When Lincoln opposed slavery, he emphasized so heavily what an outrage it was that somebody goes out and works all day in the hot sun and somebody else derives all the profits. And I think that he felt so strongly about that aspect of slavery, because he himself had worked hard in the hot sun all day and he had made some money, and then he had to turn it over to his father, which he did. And therefore, I think unconsciously Lincoln identified himself with the slaves and his father with the slave owners. Now we don't have hard irrefutable evidence for that, but Lincoln does at one point say in a speech, "My friend out there, Johnny Roll, he used to be a slave and I used to be a slave, but we've been able to rise in the world, but Black people can't do that. And so slavery is really an outrage. It's a monstrous injustice."

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

And then when he courts a woman in his New Salem days, when he was in his early and mid-20s, he gets engaged to her, and then he gets buyer's remorse and says, "Oops, I want to get out of this," and he writes a long letter in which he describes how he managed to wiggle out of this engagement to be married. And he says in that letter, "There is no form of bondage, real or

imaginary, that I have ever been in from which I more longed to escape." So he's saying, I know what it's like to be a slave. Now, that's of course a metaphor, but I don't think people use metaphors lightly. I think that they're oftentimes revealing of what goes on beneath the rational conscious surface of our egos.

### **Young Lincoln's opposition to slavery**

00:11:15:00

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

When Lincoln enters political life in his early 20s, slavery had become, at least in Central Illinois, a hot button issue, that Illinois was like a microcosm of the country. Northern Illinois was filled with Northerners, southern Illinois was filled with Southerners, and central Illinois, where Lincoln lived, was filled with a combination of the two. And so in Springfield, when he was in his 20s and 30s, there was a fairly strong movement in favor of slavery, but there was also a respectable minority that was opposed. And when Lincoln was serving in the Illinois state legislature, slavery didn't come up a lot, but it does at one point when he is in his second term as a member of the Illinois House of Representatives.

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

And at that point, the abolitionist movement had gotten off the ground. And one of the things that the abolitionists in the North were emphasizing was that slavery should be abolished in Washington, D.C., that to be sure the federal government didn't have the power to abolish slavery in the states, but Congress had plenary power over affairs in Washington.

And so Congress was being deluged with petitions circulated by abolitionists calling for the President- or for the Congress to abolish slavery in

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Washington. And so Southern legislatures were indignant, and they appeal to their northern counterparts saying, would you please condemn the abolitionists and their petition campaign to abolish slavery in Washington. And the Illinois House of Representatives in which Lincoln sat, voted 77 to 6 to condemn the abolitionist movement. And then the state Senate voted unanimously to condemn the abolitionist movement. So here's a hundred legislators, 6 of them, just 6 out of 100 said, "No, we're not going to condemn the abolitionists."

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

And two of those six went even further, and they issued a statement that was posted on the Illinois House of Representatives journal saying, we believe that slavery is based on injustice and bad policy. That was written by Lincoln, and he circulated it and tried to get other legislators to sign it. And only one other guy did, and he was from Vermont, and he was not running for reelection. So Lincoln really stuck his neck out and took a lot of nerve for an ambitious young man. He was very eager to get ahead in politics, but why would he risk sticking his neck out on the slavery issue at that tender age, at that point in his career? And I think that illustrates the depth of his anti-slavery conviction. And he says later on, he says, "I've always hated slavery as much as any abolitionist." A statement back in 1837, that slavery is based on injustice by a bad policy was my feeling then. And it is my feeling now.

00:14:17:00

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

Lincoln's first major political speech was addressed to a group of young men in Springfield known as the Lyceum. This Lyceum Address of Lincoln is sparked by an episode that took place in Alton, Illinois, a few months earlier, where an abolitionist editor, Elijah Lovejoy, was murdered by a pro-slavery



mob. And so Lincoln denounces throughout this remarkable speech, for a young man of his age, he was 28 years old, he denounces mob violence in general, and he particularly singles out the murder of Lovejoy. He doesn't mention Lovejoy by name, but it's clearly the fellow he's talking about.

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

And then he talks about a Black man who was burned at the stake in St. Louis and what a horrifying event that was. And he talks about how abolitionists are persecuted by mobs in the South. And so while it's not an overtly pro-abolitionist speech, the subtext of that speech is very much sympathy for abolitionists and indignation at the way in which abolitionists have been canceled, as it were, in modern parlance, in the case of Lovejoy, murdered. And in the case of some abolitionists in the South, murdered.

### **An introspective period in Lincoln's life**

00:15:46:00

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

Well, one of the striking features about Lincoln's political career is that it was suspended at a key point. At the age of 39, Lincoln had served four terms in the Illinois House of Representatives, served one term in the United States Congress, and had campaigned for office every election cycle from the age of 23 up to the age of 39. And then all of a sudden he stops. And then from 39 to 45, he sits on the political sidelines. He does a little bit of politicking, but nothing compared to what he had been doing since he was 23. And so for many historians, that seems like a fallow period of not much interest.

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

And if you look at his correspondence in that period, it's mostly related to his law practice, which was pretty dull reading, actually. And it seems as though

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nothing's going on in his life. And outwardly, politically, that's true, but underneath the surface, a tremendous change is taking place, that Lincoln underwent what many men go through in their early 40s, and that is a midlife crisis in which people ask- men oftentimes ask themselves have I made the right career choice? Have I married the right person? Have I devoted too much time and energy to pleasing the collective? Have I really suppressed aspects of my true self in order to please others? What do I want to leave as a legacy? What's truly important?

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

And this oftentime is triggered by the realization that you're not going to live forever. Now you've known that since you're a kid, but once you reach your 40s, you realize that there are probably fewer years left than you've already spent, and do you want to continue doing what you've been doing? And so there's a painful period of introspection that many men go through in their early to mid 40s.

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

Now, some people crash and burn as a result of that, some people don't much change at all, but some people experience tremendous psychological growth. One of the things that triggers that is failure, and a sense of failure. And that's almost built-in to life for men, because when you're in your 20s, you form a dream of what I would like to be; when you're in your 40s, either you've achieved that and you say, "Is that all?" Or you don't, and you say, "I feel like a failure." So it's a lose/lose situation for many men, but particular, if you've failed, and Lincoln was acutely aware of having failed.

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

He writes a personal memo in this period where he talks about how his career has been a flat failure, especially compared to Stephen A. Douglas, that Stephen A. Douglas has gone from one success to the next to the next to the

next, and his name is known throughout the country and indeed throughout the world, whereas I'm a nobody. And he doesn't say that publicly, but he writes that out, but he's also very modest in public. And so but out of that can come tremendous growth, and we don't know why, but it does. Why it happens for some men and some others, it doesn't happen, it's hard to say.

### **Lincoln's command of his ego**

00:19:03:00

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

Insofar as Abraham Lincoln represents an unusual form of public figures in the history of the American presidency, one of the striking features about Lincoln is, and was one of the things that made him a successful president, is that he had the remarkable ability to suppress his ego. Now human beings by nature tend to be egotistical. It's just built-in, it's part of our DNA.

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

And that's particularly true of people in politics and show business, but particularly politics, that as I had a former governor of Illinois come to speak to my class once, and he told my students this, "Now there's one thing you all ought to realize about us people in politics. What we really want is to be loved." This is Jim Edgar of Illinois. And so people in politics oftentimes pander, and they take criticism personally, they take disagreement personally, they're super thin-skinned, and Lincoln was none of that.

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

Lincoln had a remarkable ability to overcome his ego, to refuse to take things personally, any kind of criticism or any kind of disagreement. And my favorite quote from Lincoln is something that he wrote to a young Union soldier, a captain in the Union army midway through the war, in which he told this young man who had been squabbling with his superior officers not to do that.

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MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

And in the course of this letter, he quotes from his favorite author, one of his favorite authors, Shakespeare, from one of his favorite plays, which is Hamlet. And in Hamlet, you may recall that the father of the son who goes off to college, the father Polonius says to us son Laertes, neither a borrower nor lender be, and that sort of thing, that are familiar injunctions, but Lincoln emphasizes a slightly less well-known one. He says to this young Union captain, he says- and then he's quoting from Shakespeare. He says the advice of a father to a son, and he quotes from Polonius's speech to Laertes. He says, "Beware of entrance to a quarrel, but being in, bear it, that the opposed may beware of thee."

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

In other words, don't get involved in fights, but once you're in, show no mercy. Lincoln said that advice is good and yet not the best. Quarrel not at all. No man determined to make the most of himself can spare time for personal contention, still less can he afford to take all the consequences, including the vitiating of his temper and the loss of self-control. Yield greater things to which you can show no more than an equal claim and lesser things though clearly your own. Better to give your path to a dog than be bitten by him and contesting for the right, even killing the dog would not cure the bite.

Well, that to my mind, encapsulates and expresses Lincoln's remarkable ability to rise above the ego, to take nothing personally. And that was the secret to his ability to keep the North unified, because in order to keep the North unified, you had to keep the party unified. In order to keep the party unified, you had to placate the radicals and the conservatives and the moderates, and Lincoln had a remarkable ability to do that and not to take criticism and disagreement personally.

**The second inaugural address**

00:22:38:00

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

Well, Lincoln's capacity for self-reflection, for introspection, was remarkable; and as president was quite concerned about what was at stake, and why this war was being waged. And one of the things he thought was his most important challenge was to justify the conflict to his constituents. And time and again, he would remind his constituents, particularly at Gettysburg, but on many other occasions, of what was at stake in the war.

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

And one of the most agonizing documents in the Lincoln canon is something he writes to himself at a point, we don't know just where in the war, but probably toward the end of the war, in which he's reflecting on his role and on God's will. And he writes something called the Meditation on the Divine Will, in which he says, "The will of God prevails." And then he goes on to say God could have stopped this war before it started. God could stop this war anytime He wants to; but He allowed it to start, and He allows it to go on and on and on. And I don't understand. What's on his mind? How could He want to create so much death and bloodshed, and so many widows, and so many orphans? And Lincoln broods and broods over this, and then he wonders, are we really on God's side? And so he says- and he thinks about that, and thinks about it, and thinks about it, until he reaches an answer. And he doesn't answer it in the form of a personal memo. He answers it in the form of his greatest address, which was the Second Inaugural. And in that address, which we usually remember for its final paragraph, "with malice towards none, with charity for all" and the like, we should make equal emphasis, and remember with equal respect, the paragraph just before that.

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

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And one of the things that I find most moving whenever I go to Washington is to go to the Lincoln Memorial and watch parents with their children stand in front of the second inaugural. As you probably know, when you go into the Lincoln Memorial and you stand before that magnificent statue, to the left you'll see on the wall the full text of the Gettysburg Address and on the right the full text of the second inaugural. And in that next to last paragraph of the second inaugural he answers that question that he opposed to himself, "what's on God's mind?" And he says in that remarkable passage which Frederick Douglass was extremely impressed by, he says "the almighty has his own purposes" and then he quotes the words of Jesus in the gospel of Saint Matthew: "woe into the word because of offenses, for it must needs be that offenses come, but woe unto that man by whom the offense cometh."

00:25:54:00

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

Lincoln goes on to say "if we shall suppose that American slavery is one of those offences which in the providence of God must needs come, and having passed through his appointed time, he now wills to remove, and that he gives to both North and South this terrible war, as the woe do unto them by whom the offence came. Shall we discern their end any departure from those divine attributes which the believers and the living God have always ascribed to him? Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away, but if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondsmans 250 years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with a lash shall be paid by another drawn with a sword, as was said 3000 years ago, so still it must be said, the judgements of the lord are true and righteous altogether."

And so Lincoln reflects not only on his own inner light but in God's will, and what the country is going through has some meaning in the eyes of the almighty.

**The Fort Sumter Crisis**

01:27:35:00

MICHAEL BURLINGHAM:

When Lincoln assumed the presidency, he had very carefully drafted a First Inaugural Address, in which he thought that he had threaded the needle: that it would be sufficiently firm to please the Republican Party, and sufficiently conciliatory to please the Upper South states, whom he hoped would come back into the Union. And it was a very challenging address, and he submitted it to many of his friends, and he tweaked it to make sure that it was not too conciliatory and not too hard-line.

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

So with a sigh of relief, then, he assumes the reins of the presidency. He gives his inaugural address. He thinks, "Whew. Okay, I've gotten through. Now I can relax." And what Lincoln believed was that if he had acted sufficiently conciliatory and tough, that time would work its healing wonders. That the Upper South would say, "Well, this isn't such a hostile fellow. We can deal with him," and they'll decide to stay in the Union. And if he keeps those eight slave states who had refused to secede during the first round of secession, if he can keep them loyal, then the other seven slave states will come back into the Union, realizing that they were too few in number to really make a go of it as an independent nation.

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

So, Lincoln heaves a sigh of relief, and then the next day he goes to his office for the first real work day. And there on his desk is a statement saying Fort Sumter, which is in the middle of Charleston Harbor and which has become a symbol in the eyes of the North, of Northern resolve to maintain the Union, Fort Sumter is about to run out of food, and that the president has to either

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decide to send food and/or reinforcements, or to give it up. And he was under tremendous pressure to give it up, because it seemed as though the South Carolinians would attack the fort if Lincoln refused to surrender it.

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

And so his Secretary of State, William Henry Seward, who was by far the more well-known Republican leader, far better known than Lincoln was at the time of the nomination ... Seward, his Secretary of State, said, "Oh, well, we'd better give it up." And Seward was actually maneuvering behind the scenes to give it up, telling Southern diplomats, informal diplomats, "Look, we're going to give it up. Don't worry, I'm working on the president. He'll give it up." The chief military authority at the time, the Commander-in-Chief of Union armies, Winfield Scott, was saying, "Oh, we've got to give up Fort Sumter."

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

And here's Lincoln, who ... and he has to have great respect for these guys. Here's Winfield Scott, whom he had championed as a presidential nominee back in 1852, who had been the hero of the War of 1812, the hero of the Mexican War, he's saying you've got to give it up. It's militarily indefensible. And here's Seward, the great statesman of the Republican Party, his Secretary of State, saying we've got to give it up.

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

And here's poor Lincoln, who's got four terms in the Illinois State Legislature and one term in the U.S. Congress, and yet he has the nerve, he has enough self-confidence to say, "I don't know." So he resists the temptation to give it up, even though he's under great pressure to do so. But he realizes that if he does give it up, that that could conceivably preserve the Union, if Virginia, which was the most important slave state of all, would agree to stay in the Union.



00:31:17:00

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

So he, on two occasions, says to representatives of the South, "If you guys will promise to stay in the Union, I'll give up Fort Sumter." But he assumed that that meant that eventually his plan would work: that the Upper South would stay in the Union, that the Lower South would agree to come back. So, it wasn't as though he didn't entertain the thought, but in general he felt that giving up Fort Sumter would be regarded as a symbol of acknowledging the legitimacy of the Confederacy, and that militarily it didn't mean much. But symbolically, it meant a great deal, and so Lincoln was challenged.

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

He said, "What can I do about Fort Sumter?" It's in such a vulnerable position, and an attempt had been made during the Buchanan administration to send in supplies and reinforcements, and the ship had been fired upon. So, Lincoln said, "Yikes. If I send a ship down there, the same thing might happen. But there's a way to make an end run around this. We can go and we can reinforce the one other fort in the South, and thereby show that we do not acquiesce on the doctrine of Secession. So, I'm going to send an expedition to Pensacola, Florida, to Fort Pickens. And once we reinforce Fort Pickens, I can go to the country and say we're going to have to give up Fort Sumter because of the military exigencies, but we're not acknowledging the legitimacy of the Confederacy because we're reinforcing Fort Pickens."

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

It's a somewhat complicated story, but the Fort Pickens mission fails and then Lincoln says, "Now what do I do?" And so he thinks, "I don't want to provoke a war, but I don't want to acquiesce on the doctrine of Secession." So he comes up with an ingenious solution. He says, "I'm going to send food to starving men," and so an expedition is gotten together where they would just

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resupply Fort Sumter, but he would also send reinforcements. And then he would tell the South, the Southern authorities, that “I'm sending food to starving men, and if you don't resist them and allow the food to go through, that will be fine. But if you resist them, we have a backup force, and we will return fire.”

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

So, it looked very conciliatory. How could you fire on ships that are bringing bread to starving men? And there are some people who argued that Lincoln was deliberately trying to provoke the South into firing the first shot. Most historians don't agree with that, and I share that skepticism. But what Lincoln did believe is that it might, but the alternative was to acquiesce in the doctrine of Secession.

00:33:54:00

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

So, what Lincoln was thinking, as he authorized the mission to Fort Sumter, this might start the war. I hope it won't, but if the war does have to come, it's imperative that they be perceived as the ones who fired the first shot, trying to keep bread from the mouths of starving men. And so, in effect, the South shot itself in the foot. We usually think of turning points of the Civil War as Gettysburg, and Antietam, and the election of 1864; but one could argue, I think, that that was the real turning point. That the South got such a black eye, such a publicity setback for having fired the first shot, that it put them on the defensive and helped make it possible for the North to prevail.

## **Underestimating the South**

00:34:50:00

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

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Lincoln's understanding of Southern public opinion has been criticized, that he overestimated the strength of unionism in the Southern states. And there's some validity to that. On the other hand, put yourself in Lincoln's shoes. If Lincoln looks at the election returns of 1860 in the South ... You see, he didn't get any votes to speak of. But there were three candidates also in the running in 1860, and two of them were regarded as, in the standards of the day, moderate. Stephen A. Douglas, the Northern Democratic candidate; and John Bell, the candidate of something called the Constitutional Union Party, which was basically the Upper South candidate; and then there was the Lower South candidate, John C. Breckinridge, the Vice-President of the United States.

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

Now, if you looked at the election returns for Breckinridge, Bell, and Douglas in the South, you would see that the combined vote of Douglas and Bell was a moderate vote, and they were in the majority. So, Lincoln thought that represented the deep and extensive well of unionism. Well, they were not unconditional unionists, and so he probably overestimated, not the extent of unionism, but the depth of unionism in the South.

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

And then, once the war begins, Lincoln has no illusions that it will be an easy fight. That he's told that our boys are more committed and more capable than those Southern boys, and he said, "No, no, no. That's not the case. They will fight fiercely and they will be a very difficult military enemy to contend with." So, I don't think he underestimated the fighting capacity of the South; but he, like most everybody, underestimated how long the war would last. Very few people understood. General Sherman was one of the few who did say, "This is going to be a long and bloody war."

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

Lincoln's failure to understand how long the war might be was something that he shared with almost everybody in the North. That they believed that the South's relative economic backwardness, its inferior numbers, because the North did outnumber the ... The potential military age population of the North was much greater than that of the South, and the industrial might of the North was much greater, and the much more sophisticated transportation network. And that all those factors would help make the war very difficult for the South to win.

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

And he, like many other Northerners, didn't fully appreciate how ferociously the South would resist and how committed the South was to preserve, not just slavery ... That is, it wasn't a war just to protect the property of the slaveholders, but it was a war to preserve the whole superstructure of white supremacy. And that even if you, in the white South, were not a slaveholder and in fact were uneducated and poor and backward, you were infinitely higher on the socioeconomic scale and the status scale than any Black. The Black could be educated, articulate, what have you. You were able to feel vastly superior, by virtue of the fact that you were white.

### **First Battle of Bull Run**

00:38:32:00

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

When the results of the First Battle of Bull Run were brought to Lincoln, he was, of course, deeply depressed and crestfallen. That he had assumed that the Union would prevail. Now, he had been warned by the General-in-Chief, Winfield Scott. He said, "Mr. President, our troops are insufficiently trained. They're too green. They need more trainings, drills, supply." And Lincoln said,

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"Well their troops are also green, so that's a wash. They're equally green, equally unskilled and untrained."

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

And also, the fact was that the soldiers in the Union Army were 90-day enrollees, and their 90 days were about up. And so it was thought, well, geez, might as well use these people who have been trained, and supplied, and equipped and armed. And the plan, actually, that was drawn up for the Union Army, was a very good one and it would have succeeded if part of the Confederate Army out in the Shenandoah Valley had been held, as it was supposed to be held, in check. But instead, it managed to make an end run around the Union Army there, and get to Bull Run and to save the day.

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

So Lincoln was very discouraged and demoralized by this setback, and it was a huge blow to Northern morale. But in many ways, it was a blessing in disguise, because it forced the North to wake up and say, "Whoops. This is going to be a serious war. We better buckle down and pay more serious attention to what needs to be done." Whereas the South, on the other hand, got a swelled head and became overconfident. So, it was deeply distressing to Lincoln, to be sure, but it did turn out, in some ways, to be a blessing in disguise.

## **Lincoln hires George McClellan**

00:40:35:00

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

After the Union Army was defeated at the First Battle of Bull Run, Lincoln, of course, felt compelled to replace the commander, Irwin McDowell. But who should be in his place? And so he cast about to see if there was some soldier

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who had enjoyed any kind of military success in relatively minor skirmishes and battles. And that turned out to be George McClellan, who had in the western part of this country, in Ohio and West Virginia, had won some minor battles. And so, he was supported by General Winfield Scott, who was the commander of the Union Armies in general, to replace McDowell.

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

And McClellan had been a boy wonder. He had gone from one success to the next, to the next, to the next. He had been ranked very high in his class at West Point. He had been given a very prestigious assignment to monitor the Crimean War, just to go abroad and learn lessons that could be applied. That he had been very successful in his military career, and then he left the army, as many did, to enter the railroad business, and was a very successful railroad executive for the Illinois Central Railroad. And he seemed to exude an aura of success and accomplishment and self-confidence that was, well, infectious.

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

And so, Lincoln then offers him the command, and McClellan accepts. And it seemed like a wise appointment and for the first few months, it proved to be that McClellan took this battered, whipped army that retreated from Manassas with its tail between its legs, and whipped it into shape: restored its morale, made sure that the troops were well taken care of, that they were well-fed, that discipline was reestablished. And he turned what had been a very demoralized, defeated army into a very fine, potentially very fine, fighting force.

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

The problem was that he was timid and afraid to use it, because he was afraid of failure. And this gets back to something about Lincoln, that Lincoln's psychological growth was rooted, in part, in his sense of failure, which got him through his mid-life crisis and led to tremendous psychological growth.

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But McClellan went from one success to the next success to the next success, and then was a big failure as a general.

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

It's a little bit like Stephen A. Douglas. Stephen A. Douglas goes from one success to the next success to the next success, but then fails in his bid for the presidency. He didn't experience failure, and didn't have that kind of psychological growth that helped make Lincoln the great statesman that he became.

## **The key to Northern military success**

00:43:33:00

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

The military strategy of the North during the war, as Lincoln perceived it, was that the advantage that the North enjoyed, in terms of manpower and economic strength, was offset by the South's ability to move their forces around on what's known as interior lines.

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

And the offsetting advantage of the Union had been applied by using what we'd call, in sports terms, a full court press. That is, the Union's advantages in manpower and economic strength would prevail only if pressure were applied equally on all fronts: in the east, in the west, on the Mississippi Valley, on the blockade, all simultaneously putting pressure on the Confederacy. Because if you pressed hard in the east and not in the west, the South could shift its forces, which seems like an elementary point. But Lincoln, who had no training, of course, in military theory and military ... He had one little experience as a militiaman in the Black Hawk War, but Lincoln took out books from the Library of Congress, studied military strategy.

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MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

One thing we tend to underestimate about Lincoln when we talk about his humanity, and his eloquence, and his decency, and his statesmanship, one thing we tend to underestimate is, he was very smart. He really had a high IQ, a very powerful, logical mind, one that loved logic. For example, when he was a lawyer in his mid-40s, when he was traveling around on the circuit, he took pleasure books with him to read at night. And what were they? Euclid's Theorems. He studied geometry for fun.

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

And so, Lincoln has a very powerful mind, and he sees that this elementary principle, that you press on all fronts simultaneously, was the key to Northern success. And he tells this to a Union general in January of '62. He hadn't even been in office for a year. And so, he writes to this general, Don Carlos Buell, and says this is our way to win, and he keeps pressing generals to do this. And he couldn't get the generals and the admirals to coordinate their efforts to keep a full court press going until 1864, when he finally gets Grant, and Sherman, and Sheridan, and Thomas, and the navy all on the same page, and then the war is finally won. But that was Lincoln's understanding of how the war should be pursued, what the strategy should be. He just had a hard time getting all of his generals to actually execute it.

## **George McClellan's fear of failure**

00:46:25:00

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

Well McClellan did a remarkable job in restoring morale to the army, and drilling it, and training it, and preparing it for fighting. But then was very timid about actually deploying it, and that was partly because of his fear of



failure. And one of the things we have to remember about the generals in the Civil War, in fairness, is that these gentlemen were saddled with enormous responsibility. They were huge armies that they were in charge of; and the fear of failure, and “what if I lose?” was crushing.

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

And time and again, you see a captain who is a good captain, but then he's a failure as a colonel. Or a colonel who's a good colonel, then fails as a general. That a general in charge of a brigade fails in charge of a division. That a good general of a division fails as a commander of a corps. That people rise to levels of responsibility where they just crack.

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

And the generals that fought the Civil War were in charge of enormous armies, far greater than anything that the United States had ever fielded. It was the biggest army in the world by the end of the war, and so we have to cut them a little slack, it seems to me, but McClellan was particularly timid. And sometimes his timidity is written off as the fault of his intelligence arm, that the estimates that were given to him by Allen Pinkerton were grossly exaggerated. And so he always felt that his army was outnumbered, which wasn't the case at all. But in fact, McClellan was making those mistakes even before Pinkerton came on board. And so McClellan was constantly timid and fearful about committing his troops in a way that would have produced victory.

### **Mistrust between Lincoln and McClellan**

00:48:30:00

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

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One of the problems that McClellan had, as commander of the Army of the Potomac, was his ego, his arrogance, and his unwillingness to cooperate with Lincoln, that when the two of them decided how they would formulate the grand strategy for taking Richmond, for example, this McClellan's major plan for 1862 was to march on Richmond. And Lincoln says, well, that's a good idea, of course, let's March Overland so that the Union army is always between the Confederate army in Washington, because we don't want them to take Washington. That would be a terrible blow for Union morale and would be an invitation for European powers to intervene. But McClellan said, "no, no, I would prefer to take the army on boats and float them down the Chesapeake Bay, down to the peninsula of Virginia formed by the James New York rivers, and then March up that peninsula to Richmond and take it."

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

And on paper, that was a perfectly legitimate plan, but Lincoln raised some objections. He said, "look, if you take the army and send it all the way down on boats to the peninsula, what's going to happen when they're on route? Can't the Confederates rush in and take the Capital?" And McClellan said, "I'll leave enough men behind" and Lincoln said, "well, how many?" And he said, "well, I'll leave enough behind." And they reached what Lincoln thought was an agreement about how many troops would be left behind to protect Washington. And then when McClellan starts sailing, Lincoln sees whoa, he has not lived up to what he said he would leave behind, so he has some of those troops that were part of the invasion force withheld and McLellan gets all bent out of shape and says, "Oh, I can't possibly win unless I have those extra troops."

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

And Lincoln says, "well, do the best you can. And I'll see if I can peel off some of them to go down." But McClellan's failure to trust Lincoln to take him into his confidence and McClellan wouldn't even share his plans with Lincoln for

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the longest time, it was poor Lincoln. In the fall of 1861, he's constantly asking McClellan "what are you going to do?" And he said, "well, I'll let you know when I come up with a plan," and Lincoln was treated with the utmost contempt by McClellan. There are numerous examples where McClellan snubbed him. One famous example was recorded in John Hay's diary, the Lincoln's assistant personal secretary, that the president and his secretary and the secretary of state, Seward, went over to McClellan's house, which was very near the White House, and was told by the servant that McClellan was out, but will be back soon. So Lincoln said, "well, we'll just wait here." And so McClellan comes in and walks right past them and goes up to bed. And John Hay was furious and says, "Mr. President, we can't put up with this insolence of epaulets."

00:51:25:00

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

And Lincoln says, "this is no time to quarrel," and then later says, "I will hold McClellan's horse, if he will just give us victories." And anybody would have fired McClellan much sooner. And Lincoln has been criticized. Well, why did you stick with McClellan for so long a period? And Lincoln's answer was given to one Senator from Ohio, Ben Wade, comes in and says, "you've got to get rid of McClellan, his heart's not in the war, he's not taking any initiative. And you've got to get rid of him." And so Lincoln says, "okay, who should be put in his place?" And Ben Wade says, "well, anybody, anybody." And Lincoln says "anybody may do for you Senator, but I have to name a biped, I have to put somebody in there, who should it be?" And when you think about what happens to the successors of McClellan, that Burnside comes in and he fails, then Pope comes in and he fails, Hooker comes in and he fails, Meade comes in and sort of succeeds. So there was not an obvious off the shelf general to replace McClellan, exasperating though he was.

**First attempt to capture Richmond**

00:52:40:00

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

Well, as 1862 begins, the North is very demoralized and discouraged because McClellan has trained this army beautifully, but then has shown great timidity in actually using it. And the public is downcast, dispirited. And when Lincoln finally gets McClellan to move, there's increased hope. And there's good news from the West. All of a sudden in February, Grant wins an important pair of battles at Fort Donaldson and Fort Henry. And then in March, McClellan starts to move on Richmond. There's some Naval success at Port Royal and in North Carolina. And so as March yields to April, there's some optimism, that the North seems to be on a roll, that New Orleans is captured in a brilliant operation by both the army and the Navy. And if McClellan can just capture Richmond, then the war will be over.

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

So the very high hopes from despair at the turn of the year into the spring, when things are starting to look very positive and McClellan's got this huge army, well-trained, well-disciplined, well supplied, well-armed, and then he fails. And that in his June battles and his attempt to capture Richmond, McClellan shows himself to be an inadequate general. Robert E Lee shows himself to be a brilliant tactician, Northern moral, which had been so strong in the spring then is plunged into despair as a result of McClellan's failure to capture Richmond.

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

Well, after the army of the Potomac fails to take Richmond, people feel as though Lincoln and Stanton are responsible and McClellan felt that way. And one of the most amazing documents in the Lincoln Canon is a telegram that McClellan sends blaming Stanton and Lincoln for the loss, and that attitude

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was adopted by many critics of Lincoln in the North and of Stanton as well. And one of the more remarkable instances of Lincoln's humility, is a speech that he gives shortly after the failure of McClellan to take Richmond, and in this speech before a crowd in Washington, he says that there's been a lot of criticism of Stanton for the failure to capture Richmond.

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

And I want it to be understood that that was my doing, that I made the decisions that were being implemented and that in so far there's blame to be allocated, I'm the one to blame, and it was truly remarkable. Lincoln's willingness to accept responsibility for things that went wrong and not to blame others for the setbacks was one of the secrets to his success as president, the people trusted him, they believed him, they accepted the fact that this man was not out to feather his own nest psychologically, financially, in any other way, politically. And that Lincoln's selflessness and his self abnegation were winning qualities that made his popularity in the North, one of the foundations of that popularity.

## **Lincoln listens to the concerns of Americans**

00:56:24:00

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

Well, Lincoln enjoyed what he called his "public opinion baths." That is people coming in to ask for this favor or that favor. And he would talk to them about how they felt about the war and the like. And so this exposure to common ordinary people, and he was swamped with people coming in asking for favors, sometimes pretty small favors. Could you get my tenant to pay his rent and things like that. And he was criticized by his secretaries Nicolay and Hay, and also by newspaper editors for wasting time when dealing with the petty concerns of common, ordinary people. And he said, no, no, no, this is the way

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I get to have some sense of what's on the public's mind, newspapers say they don't have the kind of access to the common ordinary people that I have.

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

And so he thought that spending time with those people was time well spent in order for him to feel the pulse of the public. And it wasn't public opinion polls. These were people coming in with genuine problems and he had learned this in his career as a lawyer. Now, a lot of presidents have law degrees, but Lincoln is one of the few who actually practiced law. And he practiced law and not as a grand— sometimes he's written off as a railroad lawyer, well, that's a gross exaggeration of the rich railroad lawyer. I think what? He did represent railroads, but he also represented farmers suing railroads and others suing railroads. So Lincoln as a lawyer, he took business where it came. He would argue both sides of the case. And he would take doctors who were being sued for malpractice, and he would defend doctors who were being sued for malpractice and the like.

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

In any event, Lincoln practiced a lot before juries. And one of the things that you had to do, and any lawyer does who's a litigator now, has to persuade a jury, he has to connect to the jurors because the jury will oftentimes decide a case not on its merits necessarily, but on whether they like the prosecutor or the defense lawyer. And so, Lincoln had a long experience, not only in his political career of trying to persuade people, but he had this capacity... and dealing with common ordinary people all the time. And so his ability to keep his finger on the pulse and public opinion through these public opinion baths was one of the secrets of his success.

00:58:58:00

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

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Well, Lincoln's ability to relate to the common ordinary people, to appreciate their travails and struggles and hardships was essential for him in understanding public opinion during the war. And one of the things that people admired about Lincoln is that they thought here's a man who understands us, here's a man who sympathizes with us, here's a man who's not wrapped up in his own ego and out to promote his own interests. He's got the welfare of the country at heart, and people would talk about his utter forgetfulness of self as an admirable quality. And so his ability to relate to common, ordinary people and to make them feel as though he understood them and sympathized with them and was in their corner, was one of the most important elements of his success as a statesman, as a political leader.

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

Well, in February of 1862, Lincoln's favorite son, Willie, dies. And back in those days, people didn't make many bones about acknowledging a favorite. These days, everybody says that I don't have a favorite child and everybody lies. But Lincoln clearly preferred Willie to his other sons. And Mary says he was our favorite. And the reason was that Willie was like a clone of Lincoln. He had Lincoln's temperament. He had his sense of humor. He had his sense of values. And it's a remarkable thing if you get a child who really is like, you feel as a clone, he is very similar to you in so many ways. And that wasn't true with Robert. And one of the saddest aspects of Lincoln's personal life is that he and his eldest son didn't get along very well. No, they weren't estranged the way Lincoln was from his own father, but they didn't really connect very well. And that's because Robert had a different personality, had a different temperament. And when you have children, you roll the genetic dice; you may get a child just like you, a child very different from you. And in the case of Robert, the differences between him and his father were great. And it's not the fault of the father. It's not the fault of the son. That's just the way the genetic dice rolled. But with Willie, he had enormous gratification of having a

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child who thought like him, shared his sense of values, shared his sense of humor. And then their second son died at the age of three. And then the fourth son, the final son, Thomas, Tad, was what we would call today, a learning disabled child. And he was a lovable child in many ways, but he wasn't a clone Lincoln the way Willie was.

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

And so Lincoln derived great comfort from having a son like Willie. And then Willie dies in February of 1862 at the age of 11, and Lincoln is crestfallen, is terribly downcast. And as a result of this personal sorrow, I think he came to have a deeper religious sense because his wife said this, that this helped deepen Lincoln's understanding of Providence and the Almighty. And I think that Lincoln's appreciation for that aspect of life, which so deeply informed his second inaugural address. His greatest speech, helped deepen him and make him a more admirable character.

## **Why Robert Lincoln does not join the army**

01:02:51:00

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

So Lincoln's empathy with people who are losing their sons in the war was enhanced and heightened by the death of his own son, Willie. And at that time, his son, Robert was a college student and people were asking, well, why doesn't Robert go into the army? And Lincoln himself wanted his son to join the army. And Robert himself wanted to join the army, but Mrs. Lincoln said no, that she'd already lost two of her sons. Now the Lincoln's had four children and two of them had died by the time they were in the white house. And so just two were left, and Mrs. Lincoln thought I can't afford to lose another child. That would just crush me.



MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

And Lincoln was very nervous about his wife's mental stability. And so he accommodated her and said, okay, Robert, you stay in college. But then he would have arguments with his wife and she would say, I just can't stand the thought of losing another child and Lincoln would say, but dear, they're mothers out there who've lost all their children in this war. And we can't be selfish about this. And she said, well, yes, I understand that intellectually, but emotionally I can't deal with that prospect.

### **Lincoln's capacity for empathy**

01:04:11:00

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

Lincoln was prone to depression as is well known. And on two occasions, he was so depressed in his earlier pre-presidential life that his friends feared that he would commit suicide. And he evidently wrote a poem about somebody who commits suicide and he refers time and again, to committing suicide, even on his presidential years metaphorically, but the metaphor, I think, reveals something deeper. And the origins of Lincoln's depression, I think, are fairly easily identified. That is he was surrounded by death as a young man. His mother died when he was nine under very painful circumstances. At that same time, his surrogate grandparents died. He had two siblings, a brother who died in infancy, and then an older sister who died in childbirth when Lincoln was a teenager. And then his sweetheart, Ann Rutledge dies. And all of these deaths, I think help predispose him to depression.

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

Now people get depressed for lots of different reasons, but one of the most important that I'm familiar with from the psychological literature, is the early

death of a parent. And that can be offset. If you lose a parent when you're a kid, that psychological damage can be offset if the surviving parent is emotionally nurturing and available and supportive, but Thomas Lincoln didn't fit that description. Now Lincoln did get a stepmother 15 months after his mother died, and the stepmother did undo a lot of the damage, but not all of the damage.

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

And so that's I think the origin of Lincoln's depression. Now, what's the effect of Lincoln's depression? And the effect I think, is to give him a sense of empathy with people who are suffering, that would include slaves, that would also include parents of soldiers killed in the war or wounded in the war. And that empathy came through in Lincoln, in his being, in his speeches, in his relationships to people, and that too helped convince the North that this was an admirable fellow. And that his empathy was one of the secrets to his success, of bonding with the North and helping to make him an effective president.

### **Lincoln's gradual evolution toward emancipation**

01:06:41:00

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

Lincoln was quite moved, of course, by the deaths of so many Union soldiers, it was a terrible burden on his conscience if he was responsible, and in the wake of some of these horrific defeats like Fredericksburg, and Chancellorsville, Lincoln was deeply depressed because these deaths weighed heavily on his own conscience. And during the summer months, when he was president, he would live in something called the Soldier's Home, which was about three miles from the White House. And it was elevated, it was on a hill and it was cooler than the temperature would be in the White

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House, but it was also near a bunch of Union graves and near a hospital. So he would see, going back and forth to work and his commute as it were, graves, wounded soldiers and the like, and they weighed extremely heavily on his conscience.

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

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

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

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

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

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

## **Negotiating for Emancipation**

01:10:19:00

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

And he felt constrained, however, as president by political considerations and constitutional considerations. The Constitution, as he understood it, and almost everybody in the North understood it, did not authorize the federal government to abolish slavery in the states, that if the states wanted to, they could, and the federal government could encourage them by, as Lincoln proposed, offering to compensate slaveholders.

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

And so, when Lincoln dealt with the issue of slavery in the earlier stages of the war in '61, and up to September of '62, he felt constrained by the Constitution and also by political considerations. Lincoln believed, quite reasonably, that if the border slave states, of particularly Missouri and Kentucky and Maryland, were to cast their lot with the Confederacy, that the Confederacy would probably win. Now, we have to think of the South as really divided into three layers, in effect. There's the lower South of Mississippi, Alabama, Louisiana, Texas, Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, the original Secession states. Then there's the upper South of Virginia, Tennessee,

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Arkansas, North Carolina. And then, there's a third belt that is the border slave states, Kentucky, Maryland, Delaware, and Missouri.

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

And the military resources available in those border states were just as important as the military resources available in the other two layers of the slave South, and so if the border states did cast their lot with the Confederacy, the North would probably lose. So, Lincoln had to have that in mind, and particularly Kentucky. Kentucky was geographically very central. Kentucky also provided men, horses, mules, food. And Lincoln was from Kentucky, and he had-- his dearest friends were in Kentucky, and they were advising him on Southern opinion, on Kentucky opinion in particular. And they were advising him, soft pedal the slavery issue. So political considerations, strategic considerations, and constitutional considerations all tended to act as a kind of break on his impulse to emancipate the slaves.

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

And so, he hoped that he could persuade those border states to voluntarily, with federal assistance, financial underwriting, abolish slavery, and thereby convince the Confederates that their cause was lost. If they could never get the border states to join them, then they would throw in the towel. And he bent over backwards, he begged the border slave states. So, in March of 1862, he puts forward this proposal. He says, "Let's have the Congress appropriate money to be given to any state that whose government abolishes slavery, subsidies which will compensate the slaveholders. And let's adopt gradual emancipation so there isn't a sudden abrupt transition from slavery to freedom. And let's also make part of the package colonization, that is any Blacks who want to leave shall have government support, and we will try to find a haven, a refuge for those people who voluntarily want to leave, who think that they'll never get a fair shake in the United States because white racism is so widespread and so deep."

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MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

So, Lincoln offers this package of gradual compensated emancipation with a little codicil of colonization, and he's hopeful that the border slave states will adopt this. In fact, he even works behind the scenes, back in November of '61, to try to get Delaware – Delaware which has a tiny, little slave population – he floats the idea behind the scenes of compensating the slaveholders. Well, they don't bite. And then, the other border slave states. So, on three occasions, Lincoln begs these congressmen and senators from Kentucky and Maryland and Delaware and Missouri, "Please go back to your home states and urge the legislatures to abolish slavery."

01:14:45:00

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

And the first time around, they don't respond. The second time around, they don't respond. And then, the third time comes, and Lincoln... This is July of '62, and Lincoln begs them, he says, "Can't you see the handwriting on the wall, that the mere friction and abrasion of the war is going to destroy slavery? Take advantage of this plan. At least get some compensation because if you turn it down, slavery is going to be destroyed and there'll be no compensation." And they turned him down 20 to 9. And so, Lincoln, the very next day, the day after those 29 give this negative response to the third appeal for gradual compensated emancipation, then Lincoln is on a carriage ride with two of his cabinet members, and he says, "I'm going to issue an emancipation proclamation. These guys are hopeless. I've bent over backwards to accommodate them."

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

And by that time, it seemed pretty clear that Kentucky was in the Union, that is pretty firmly established. The likelihood of Kentucky really pulling out was pretty remote. But even so, he hesitated to issue the Emancipation

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Proclamation. Of course, he tells these cabinet members in July he's going to do it, and then he tells the whole cabinet. And then they say, "Well, this is probably not good timing, that if issue the Emancipation Proclamation on the heels of McClellan's defeat in the Peninsula, it will look like a desperation, insincere move and will not give as much credit, in the eyes of Northerners in general, in the eyes of foreigners, as well." And so, Lincoln says, "Okay, I'm going to put the Emancipation Proclamation in a drawer, and I'm going to wait for a military victory. And as soon as one is achieved, then I'm going to issue it." And that happens with Antietam in September of '62.

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

Now, to what extent did Lincoln feel pressure from abolitionists and from escaped slaves? Well, that's hard to say for sure, but the abolitionists were a tiny, little minority. There weren't many voters who consider themselves abolitionists, and that fugitive slaves, they didn't have any political power. They couldn't vote. So, I don't think Lincoln felt political pressure from escaped slaves or from abolitionists. He did feel some pressure from the left wing of his party, the radicals, but in general, Lincoln's movement in the direction of emancipation was dictated by circumstances. That is that the failure of the gradual compensated emancipation plan and the gradual solidification of the border states within the Union. And then and only then did he feel that the time was appropriately ripe for an emancipation proclamation to be issued. But the notion that Lincoln was a reluctant emancipator who was pushed into issuing the Emancipation Proclamation by forces against his will is really inaccurate. He wanted to issue an emancipation proclamation long before he did.

**The public isn't "ready" for Black soldiers**

01:17:57:00

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

Well, when Lincoln contemplated emancipation, when he drafted the Emancipation Proclamation, he did not include the enlistment of Black soldiers, that he felt that that was not sufficiently popular, that the public had to be prepared for that gradually, and that if he moved too soon in that direction, he might forfeit popular... particularly in the border states. Because emancipation is one thing, Black soldiers are another. But then, when he issues the final Emancipation Proclamation, that does include a provision saying Blacks can be recruited into the Union army. Now, Lincoln originally thought that they would not be combat soldiers, that they'd be support troops, but nonetheless, that was a huge step forward. And to what extent the need to have Blacks serve in military capacities impelled Lincoln to issue the Emancipation Proclamation, it's hard to measure with any precision, but it seems it certainly had to be on his mind. Not the primary consideration, but a consideration nonetheless.

### **Lincoln's early experiences with Black Americans**

01:19:09:00

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

One of the things that is underappreciated is that Lincoln lived in a racially mixed neighborhood. If you go to the Lincoln home today, you'll notice it's more of a neighborhood. The house is preserved, but also the block that it's on and the block south of that, and both sides of the street are preserved. And so, if you're facing the Lincoln home and you start walking to the right, you come to what is, unfortunately, an empty lot, but then you'll see a sign that this was the home of Jameson Jenkins. Jameson Jenkins was a Black man, and he and his family lived there. And he was a, what we would call today, a delivery person. He was FedEx and UPS. And actually took Lincoln's baggage



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to the train station when Lincoln left. And so, Lincoln knew... And this guy was an Underground Railroad conductor. He had really a lot of nerve.

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

And my mentor, David Donald, in his biography of Lincoln says, "Well, Lincoln didn't know many Black people in Springfield, and those that he knew were rather subservient and quiescent and they would never speak up." And here's Jameson Jenkins, a conductor in the Underground Railroad. And then, I did some research into servants in the Lincoln home, Black servants, and what else did they do? And they were oftentimes, they were going to conventions, protesting against the Black laws of Illinois. The Black Laws of Illinois were really outrageous. The Black Laws stipulated that Black people couldn't hold office, they couldn't vote, they couldn't sit on juries, they couldn't serve in the militia, they couldn't intermarry with whites, and they couldn't even move into Illinois.

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

So, some of the people that Lincoln knew were what we would call today activists, the people who took part in conventions that condemn the Black Codes of Illinois and the like. And so, Lincoln was familiar with Black people who weren't just acquiescent, deferential people. They were people who had self-respect and were actively promoting the cause of Black liberation, schools for Black children. And so, when Lincoln goes to Washington, it's been said, "Well, he really didn't meet very many impressive Black people until he was in Washington," but he knew a lot of Black people in Springfield and was a close personal friend with at least one, his barber, a guy named William Fleurville.

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

And when Willie dies in the White House, in February '62, not too long thereafter, Fleurville writes a very touching letter to Lincoln, which is

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preserved in his papers, in which he talks about how much he admired Willie and how advanced he seemed and how thoughtful he seemed and what a remarkable boy he was. Then he talks about how his dog is being taken care of, how his house is being taken care of, and the whole tone of that letter indicates that this is not a barber and his client, this is a friend talking to her friend.

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

And then, one of the leaders of the Harlem Renaissance, a poet, dramatist, novelist, Arna Bontemps, wrote an essay about Lincoln in Illinois and Lincoln's relationship to Black people in Illinois. This was back in 1940, as part of the Federal Writers' Project, and with another Black author, a guy named Robert Duncan. Robert Lucas, excuse me. And this essay on Lincoln and Illinois and how the roots of Lincoln's attitudes toward Black people and slavery and the like were shaped a lot by the people he knew in Springfield. Well, that essay wasn't published until 2013. You think, "Oh my goodness." And so, what I've been doing is taking advantage of the research that a very fine historian lawyer and good friend of mine, Richard Hart, in Springfield has looked into where the Black people lived, how they interacted with Lincoln, and I've been able to discover, since Hart published his seminal article back in 1999, a lot more information is available.

01:23:24:00

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

Because historians, in recent years, have had the fantastic research tool of word-searchable newspaper databases. And when I began my career as a historian as- David Donald's research system as a college student, I spent hour after hour in the bowels of a library turning the crank of a microfilm reader looking for information about Charles Sumner, and now we have these fantastic... These databases are like giant magnets that you take to the

haystacks and all the needles come out. And so, I found a lot more information about Lincoln's interaction with Black people in Springfield, and uniformly, they regard him as cordial, respectful. And it wasn't just deferential, but it was- there was real warmth. And again, the notion that these people were just politically quiescent is simply not true. An Underground Railroad conductor, people going to these conventions, protesting against the Black laws, establishing movements to make sure that Blacks had schools and education in Springfield. This was a pretty remarkable group of Black people that Lincoln dealt with in Springfield before he got to Washington.

### **Black people visit Lincoln in the White House**

01:24:35:00

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

When Lincoln was president, he had many, many Black callers come to the White House, and there had only been two before that in the history of the White House, one Paul Cuffee, and another Daniel Payne. But then Lincoln had lots of Black people come to the White House. He was very welcoming. And many of the Black people who came were very eminent people, bishops in the African Methodist Episcopal church, leading spokesmen for the anti-slavery cause, like Frederick Douglass and Martin Delaney. And Sojourner Truth. Then his wife's best friend was her Black dressmaker, Elizabeth Keckley, and he was very friendly with Elizabeth Keckley, as was Mrs. Lincoln. But then a lot of just ordinary Black people come in and have requests for the ordinary things that Lincoln's callers asked for.

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

And one of the surprising things I found was that every time a Black person came into the White House and was treated with any kind of respect, which

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was every Black person who came to the White House was treated with respect, the Democratic newspapers went berserk. And everybody knows American history knows that when Theodore Roosevelt invited a Black man, Booker T. Washington, to dinner in 1901, it set off a volcano of indignation. Well, Lincoln was doing that all the time, on a smaller scale to be sure. And there's a very fine political scientist that at Howard University, Clarence Lusane, who wrote a very fine book called *The Black History of the White House*, and he says that that Lincoln's treatment of Black people, his making Black people available... or being available to Black people, not just for the courtesy but for politics, people coming in and asking for things.

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

And one of the most dramatic examples is two Black gentlemen come from New Orleans in March of 1864, and they bring with them a petition, signed by hundreds of Black residents of New Orleans saying, "Look, we are taxpayers, we are literate, we're educated, and we would like the right to vote." And Lincoln, according to these two gentlemen, was very cordial and very receptive, but he said, "Under our Constitution, states get to make the rules about who gets to vote for national office, for president and members of Congress. And so, the new Constitution that's about to be adopted in Louisiana is the place to exert pressure. I'm very sympathetic, but it's really beyond the control of the federal government."

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

But in response to these two Black gentlemen, then Lincoln writes to the newly elected Republican governor of Louisiana saying, 'You're about to hold a Constitutional convention, and I think it would be advisable if you would make sure that the delegates to that convention incorporate into their new constitution the voting rights for Blacks, at least those who have served gallantly in our ranks, that is soldiers, sailors, and those are very intelligent,' by which I assume he meant literate. And Lincoln said, "This is for your

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private consideration, but I think this is a good idea. This would keep the jewel of liberty within the family of freedom." Whoa, nice imagery.

01:28:06:00

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

And then the governor then takes that and he shows it to members of the constitutional convention, and the constitutional convention does not authorize the enfranchisement of Blacks. But when that constitutional convention first met, one of the first things they did was to say, as part of their constitution, "The legislature of Louisiana shall never be empowered to enfranchise Blacks." By the end of the constitutional convention, the new constitution said, "If the legislature does decide to enfranchise Blacks, that's okay." Now, that might seem like small potatoes to us in the 21st century, but in the context of Louisiana in 1864, it was a huge step forward, and Lincoln's informants and other informants saying, "You all don't understand what it's like down here when it comes to prejudice. And this may not seem like a big step, but it's actually a very big step."

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

So that he was responsive not just to being cordial and polite and sympathetic and empathetic and all that, but also acting on policy matters. So, it's a remarkable story. And I was amazed when I've been doing my research on this topic of Lincoln and Black people and how he interacted with them, that so little has been done, and it reflects great credit on Lincoln, and I'm eager to get that book out.

## **'Contraband' camps**

01:29:32:00

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

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About the question of slaves liberating themselves; did Lincoln feel pressure from the number of slaves who were self-emancipating, were running to Union lines? And Lincoln, of course, encouraged that. One of the things that people don't realize is that Lincoln really began to emancipate slaves in August of 1861 with the first Confiscation Act. Congress passed a bill called the... It wasn't known as the Confiscation Act, eventually known as the First Confiscation Act. Anyway, it was right after Bull Run. And in that statute, Congress said that any slaves who are being employed by Southerners in a quasi-military capacity, as building fortifications or serving as valets or cooks or whatever in the army, any slaves who have been used to help the Confederacy militarily, who come to our lines, shall be admitted and not be returned.

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

Well, that seems like a very narrow slice of the slave population, but when Lincoln issued orders, or the War Department issued orders, presumably at Lincoln's approval, the orders that were issued to carry that out were very broad. The law was very narrow. The implementation of the law was very broad. Because, imagine, slaves come to the Union lines and they say, "We've been working on fortifications." Well, what's a Union army officer supposed to say? "You got proof? You got a video? You got some documentation of this?" No, he says, "Come on in." Well, what if they show up with a wife and children? Well, what are you going to say, "Well, you can come in, but your family has to stay behind." Of course not.

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

So, the way the Lincoln administration decided to implement the first Confiscation Act was really the beginning of administrative emancipation. Now, the one thing that Union soldiers couldn't do, under the Lincoln administration's rules about how the first Confiscation Act would be implemented, was they couldn't go out and entice slaves to come to Union

lines, but once they did come in, they were to be kept, not returned. And then, when the Emancipation Proclamation was issued, it furthered the process of emancipation that had really begun back in August of '61, and tens of thousands of slaves had been liberated through that mechanism. The one difference was now the Union army officers and men were encouraged to go out and entice slaves to run away.

**Encouraging enslaved people to flee**

01:32:24:00

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

But in 1864, when Lincoln thought that he was about to lose the presidential election, and by late August it certainly looked that way, and Lincoln was being told by his advisors and the state Republican leaders were saying, "He's not going to carry this state," that Lincoln looked as though he was about to be defeated in November. And so, he summons Frederick Douglass to the White House. Douglass had come to the White House a year earlier, not at Lincoln's summons, but with a Senator to protest the way that Black people were being treated in the army, as second class citizens in the army. Well, now, Lincoln wants to talk to Douglass, so he asks him to come to the White House.

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

So, Frederick Douglass comes, and Lincoln says, "Look, I think I'm going to get defeated. Now, whoever beats me," because the Democrats hadn't nominated an opponent yet, "whoever wins, whatever Democrat wins, he's going to end the war, and he's going to end it in such a way that the slaves who are already in our lines will be free but the slaves who haven't come to our lines won't be free. So, Douglass, the slaves aren't coming in sufficient numbers to our lines, so I would like you to organize a kind of John

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Brown-style raid to send people out, to get the word out to the slaves, 'Come to our lines and keep coming, keep coming, keep coming,' because we want to get every slave we can possibly get under the tent of freedom by March 4th, 1865, in case I get defeated." And Douglass says, "My goodness, it sounds like John Brown all over again in some ways."

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

And so, Douglass goes back and he has an elaborate plan to send out scouts to encourage slaves to run Union lines, but meantime, between the time that Douglass and Lincoln meet and the time that Douglass submits his plan a couple of weeks later, the tide has turned, the military victories at the capture of Atlanta, the military victories in the Shenandoah Valley and Mobile Bay, meant that Lincoln was going to be reelected. So, that emergency that seemed to loom in August was no longer around in September and October. So, Lincoln thought that... He was the one who pressured slaves to come to Union lines, it wasn't a question so much of slaves coming to Union lines and then pressuring him. So, I think that that's a more accurate version of the role of runaways and Lincoln's reaction. He was encouraging runaways.

## **General Butler protects fugitives**

01:35:05:00

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

The question of what to do with fugitive slaves who came to Union lines was raised very early in the war, in the spring of 1861. Three Black slaves come to Fortress Monroe at the confluence of the York and James River, a huge Union fortification, and a place well worth visiting these days, and they say, "We want to come to your lines. We've been working on Confederate fortifications." And so, the commander at that time, Benjamin Butler says, "Come on in." Well, the next day, the slave owner comes along, he says, "I'd



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like the slaves back, please. There is this statute called the Fugitive Slave Law that says you're obliged to return the fugitive slaves to me." And Benjamin Butler, very clever, is a lawyer, says, "Ahem, the Fugitive Slave Act applies to the United States. You claim that you're no longer members of the United States, and therefore, we're not going to return these slaves to you."

MICHAEL BURLINGAME:

So, Butler really gets the ball rolling. This is in May of '61. And then, then the Lincoln administration has to decide, "Are we going to back him up or not? And so, Lincoln and his cabinet decides, "Of course, we're going to back him up." So, then that gets codified in the first Confiscation Act. Then when the orders go out to the commanders in the field, then it really becomes an official policy on a much broader scale than just the episode of Benjamin Butler, but Benjamin Butler's acceptance of the runaway slaves and the refusal to return them sets the ball in motion.

END TC: 01:36:50:00