LINCOLN'S DILEMMA

LESSON THREE - CHALLENGING THE MYTH OF THE "GREAT EMANCIPATOR"

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- **Who writes history? Who revises history?**
- **What primary sources have historically been used to create our nation's understanding of enslavement and the Civil War?**
- **Why is it important to challenge the narrative of Lincoln as the "Great Emancipator"?**

In this lesson, students will use excerpts from the third episode of the docu-series and the Interview Archive to scrutinize the historical narrative of Lincoln as the "Great Emancipator." They will also re-examine the people and events that led to the emancipation of enslaved people in America and reflect on the implications of this narrative on our larger understanding of our nation's struggle for freedom *and* equality.

LESSON OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- **Explore** the Emancipation Proclamation as a foundational document in American history
- **Compare and contrast** multiple perspectives from historians on the events, individuals, and ideas that led to emancipation
- **Examine** the many kinds of leadership and advocacy required to end slavery
- **Reflect** on and revise their perspectives on Lincoln's role in emancipation

One 55-minute class period

American Studies, African American History, US History (Honors/AP), Government (Honors/AP)

- Equipment to screen film clips and interview threads
- Copies of Handouts:
  - **Handout One**: *Lincoln's Dilemma* Learning Log
  - **Handout Two**: Film Clips Transcript
  - **Handouts Three, Four, and Five**: Interview Thread Transcripts

ACTIVITIES

> African Americans, people like Douglass, understood that Lincoln was not really the 'Great Emancipator.' Abraham Lincoln, from their perspective, didn't free the slaves. But what Lincoln did was inaugurate that work.

CHRIS BONNER
ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR AND HISTORIAN, UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND

Illustration by Studio AKA

> So Lincoln created a process that helped to lead to emancipation, but emancipation was really done on the backs of African Americans.

LONNIE G. BUNCH III
SECRETARY, SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION

OPENING

Share these questions and discuss student responses:

DISCUSS

> Who writes history?

> Can history be revised? Why or why not?

> If revised, then when, who, and how should it be revised?

Discuss student responses to these questions.

Transition from this discussion and ask students if they know the definition of the words emancipate, emancipation, or emancipator? In follow up, share this definition from the Merriam-Webster dictionary.

Emancipate: *free from restraint, control, or the power of another especially: to free from bondage*

Teacher Note: *If you did not complete Lesson Two in this series and your students are not familiar with the Emancipation Proclamation, it may be helpful to have them read it or read it aloud.*

Debrief the reading of the document.

- When was it issued?
- What was its purpose?
- Was it an important document? Why or why not?

Next, read aloud two perspectives from historians on emancipation, Lincoln's role, and the complexity of the Emancipation Proclamation.

> Edna Greene Medford: ***"African Americans were leaving the plantations and farms long before Lincoln issued the [Emancipation] [P]roclamation. But the proclamation is important because it tells those people that the president of the United States, the most powerful man in the country, is telling you: 'You are free to go.' And so even if they were not in the vicinity of a Union force at the time, they knew the proclamation existed."***
>
> Chris Bonner: ***"There's this myth of Lincoln as the'Great Emancipator.' The idea is that Lincoln was the driving force behind the eradication of slavery in the Civil War era... The Emancipation Proclamation doesn't technically free anybody, but it does create the possibility for Black people to seize and claim their own freedom, which they did, they had been doing, and they continued to do after the enactment of that policy. [It] was radical because it was a statement that the federal government was going to be taking steps to end slavery. It was radical because it said that freedom, that emancipation was a war aim, and so it's saying that the Civil War can't be won unless enslaved people in the South are freed. But it was also conservative, or moderate or limited in profound ways because it didn't touch slavery in the border states, because it required enslaved people to find their ways to the Union lines in order to actually gain the freedom that was being held out."***

Pair Work

Organize students into pairs and have them interview one another using these prompts to guide their conversation:

- What does the phrase the "Great Emancipator" in reference to Lincoln mean to you?
- Chris Bonner refers to the idea of Abraham Lincoln as the force behind the eradication of slavery as a "myth."
  - What is a myth?
  - How are myths created?
  - What purpose do they serve?

Distribute and review Handout One: *Lincoln's Dilemma* Learning Log

Give students a few minutes to record their insights and reflections from their partner interview.

ANALYZING FILM AS TEXT

Teacher Note: *Transition from these big ideas to sharing with students that they will be watching two clips from Episode Three of* ***Lincoln's Dilemma****, which offer multiple perspectives on Lincoln's role and leadership in emancipating enslaved people.*

Remind students to use **Handout Two: Film Clips Transcripts** to follow along, underlining or highlighting ideas, names, or concepts that stand out as important, or that they would like to learn more about, especially in regards to challenging the myth of Lincoln as the "Great Emancipator." The notes and ideas from this lesson will be particularly helpful for their final project.

At the end of both clips, students will use the discussion prompts in pairs or small groups.

Watch Film Clip One: Myth of the "Great Emancipator" (3:05)

The first clip presents conversations between protesters disagreeing about how to characterize the memory of Lincoln and his place in American history and historians' reflections on Lincoln's legacy. Share with students that this opening of Episode Three is a strong example of revisiting existing narratives of history.

DISCUSS

> What new perspectives did you hear about Lincoln in this clip?

> What role do you think Lincoln played in emancipation, and why is it remembered in the way that it is?

> Journalist Jelani Cobb shared at the end of the clip, ***"We can't know or understand Lincoln at the same time that we have an emotional investment in preserving him as a savior. But it is in understanding the trial and error and the failures and the shortcomings and the contradictions that he becomes most useful to us, and really by only understanding the things he got wrong can we really grasp the magnitude and importance of the things he got right."***

> Why do you think some want to preserve the idea of Lincoln as a savior?

> In your own words, how is knowing Lincoln's shortcomings useful to understanding all the things he got right?

Teacher Note: *One of Lincoln's many strengths was his powerful oratory skills. Share with students that one of the most cited speeches of Lincoln was delivered at the dedication of the National Cemetery at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, following one of the bloodiest and most decisive battles of the Civil War.*

Illustration by Studio AKA

Watch Film Clip Two: Freedom and Equality (3:47)

In this second clip, we learn of the context in which Lincoln delivered what has become known as the Gettysburg Address. It was on the morning of November 19, 1863, after one of the bloodiest Civil War battles yet, at a time when the outcome of the war was unclear.

DISCUSS

> In the clip, Chris Bonner shares, "There was an understanding that freedom and equality were different things and that both of them were desirable, that freedom itself was not enough."

He says in Episode Three:

> *[B]eing freed from slavery doesn't necessarily mean equality. Being able to take part in this war doesn't necessarily mean that they are taking part on equal terms. But with that said, the Civil War had really transformative meanings for Black Americans. For Black men, it in some cases, gave them an opportunity to go to war with slave owners, with people who they knew were opposed to the idea of Black equality or Black freedom or Black Americanness. So Black men are able to feel that kind of empowerment through military combat.*
>
> *Black men and women and children in the Civil War era are able to cultivate a relationship with the federal government. They seek out what come to be refugee camps. They work alongside white soldiers, Black women, in large cases, work doing laundry for the Union Army and really contributing in concrete ways to making war work for the United States. And that's really, I think, meaningful as a foundation for some of the broader political claims that African Americans are making during and after the Civil War. They say we, men and women, we contributed to the war effort. We deserve to be treated with equality. Not only do we deserve emancipation, but we deserve justice. And so the work of Black men and women in the Civil War really is a foundation for later Black politics...*
>
> *There is a way to think about Lincoln as just, like, freeing the slaves or to think about the Civil War as creating emancipation. But what really happens, and I think is fascinating in the Civil War era, is that the government and individuals together create this robust relationship between Black people and federal authorities. Black people are able to make their concerns heard and federal government officials are listening to those concerns. And I think that the policy of or the process of emancipation really reflects this relationship. Enslaved people run to the Union lines and say, "We want to be free." Generals like Benjamin Butler take in enslaved people and say, "They're 'contraband.' They can not be returned to our enemies.*

> How do you understand the differences between freedom and equality?

> How does Bonner's commentary enrich your understanding of the process of emancipation?

> In what ways does Bonner's scholarship challenge the idea of Lincoln as the "Great Emancipator?"

> What do you believe is the main message of the Gettysburg Address?

> Why do you think this short speech remains important to read and discuss today?

> In what ways does the Gettysburg Address affirm or challenge the narrative of Lincoln as the "Great Emancipator"?

A CLOSE VIEW: INTERVIEW THREADS

Teacher Note: *The filmmakers conducted over 30 interviews to produce Lincoln's Dilemma. The full interviews are available in the Interview Archive on the Kunhardt Film Foundation website. A selection of these interviews, edited together here to create Interview Threads and aligned to the specific lesson topic, are available for your students' learning.*

The interview threads for this lesson offer broader perspectives on the context of emancipation, abolition, perspective, and how historians understand events.

Explain to students that they will be working in pairs to watch two Interview Threads. One will watch Thread One and one will watch Thread Two. After watching, each will share notes and discuss their insights with one another. Once they have completed this, the class will return to a large group and watch **Thread Three: How Historical Narratives are Constructed**.

Distribute **Handouts Three, Four, and Five, the Interview Thread Transcripts** on which students can follow along and make notes as they watch the threads.

At the end of both clips, students will use the discussion prompts in pairs or small groups.

Step One

Organize students into pairs. Have students record their thoughts about the thread they watch on the **Learning Log**.

Share the descriptions of Thread One and Thread Two and have pairs delegate out the viewing.

Thread One: The Importance of First-Person Narratives
Historians share the importance of reading first-person narratives from enslaved and formerly enslaved people, and the role those narratives played in the abolition movement leading to emancipation.

Thread Two: Enslaved People Emancipated Themselves
Historians share how enslaved and formerly enslaved people actively resisted, participated in the abolition movement, and took a range of actions to emancipate themselves. Historians then discuss how and why these stories have been marginalized and should be corrected and highlighted.

Step Two

Watch assigned Interview Thread and complete notes on the **Learning Log.**

Step Three

Have pairs share their insights, reflections, and notes on assigned Interview Thread.

After pairs are finished, ask a few students to read from their Learning Logs the answers to the below questions:

DISCUSS

> What were some of the main messages you learned in your thread?

> What did you see or hear that was interesting to you?

> Did this shed any light on whether or how you see Lincoln as the "Great Emancipator"? If so, in what way?

Step Four

As a large group, watch **Thread Three: How Historical Narratives are Constructed**. Have students follow along using the transcript in Handout Five.

DISCUSS

> What new information stood out in this thread?

> Do the different stories we tell about Abraham Lincoln, the Civil War and emancipation influence how we think about freedom and equality today? In what ways?

CLOSING ACTIVITY

Place a sign with "Agree" on one side of the classroom and another sign with "Disagree" on the other side of the room.

Read the three following statements aloud twice. Have students stand next to the one that best reflects their point of view on Lincoln.

> ***"Abraham Lincoln was not an abolitionist, get that through your thick skulls. He does not deserve this platform."***
>
> – Protestor
>
> ***"Somebody said about Abraham Lincoln, he was inwardly truly radical. However, to get ahead, he had to muffle and restrain that inner radicalism."***
>
> – David Reynolds
>
> ***"Lincoln, like most white Americans at the time, was forced to reckon with slavery and its consequences due to Black people themselves."***
>
> – Kerri Greenidge

After students are standing next to their position, have them discuss their point of view with a partner. If time permits, have a few students share why they placed themselves where they did.

After this exercise, have students complete the Reflection Question and the Ongoing Questions in their Learning Log.

HOMEWORK OR EXTENDED LEARNING

Students will use one of the following resources, or one they identify through their notes and questions from the film clips and/or interview threads, to corroborate or correct something they learned about emancipation and how we record and remember it.

- The Slave Narrative Collection: Library of Congress
- "Why Should a Colored Man Enlist?" by Frederick Douglass, published in Douglass' Monthly, April 1863.
- Why Historical Thinking is Not About History, Sam Wineburg

HANDOUT ONE, LESSON THREE

Lincoln's Dilemma Learning Log

Opening Exercise

What is your response to Chris Bonner when he refers to the "myth of the 'Great Emancipator'"?

What ideas in your discussion about the meaning and creation of myths were new or interesting to you?

For each historical resource, record what stood out to you as new or interesting:

Film Clips

One: Myth of the "Great Emancipator"

Two: Freedom and Equality

Interview Threads

One

Two

Three

Reflection Question

After all this exploration, who or what would you say is responsible for ending slavery?

Questions and Notes for Final Project

What additional ideas did you take away about the struggle for freedom and equality in our nation from this lesson with regard to:

Abraham Lincoln?

Individuals and activists around Abraham Lincoln?

Ideas, concepts, and events that led to the Civil War and emancipation?

If you were to represent these ideas as a memorial, monument, or other site of public memorial, what would you create?

Where would it be built?

Why this location?

Film Clips Transcript

Clip One: Myth of the "Great Emancipator"

Male Protester: This statue represents the oppression of Black people.

Chris Bonner: There's this myth of Lincoln as "the Great Emancipator." The idea is that Lincoln was the driving force behind the eradication of slavery in the Civil War era.

Jelani Cobb: This is the beneficent father who bestows upon the benighted slave his long, mislaid freedom.

Female Protester #1: This is a memorial to the white saviorism that was Abraham Lincoln.

Female Protester #2: That's your opinion, and...

Female Protester: Abraham Lincoln was not an abolitionist, get that through your thick skulls. He does not deserve this platform.

Kellie Carter Jackson: He did not start his presidency to be "the Great Emancipator". He wanted to be the great unifier, the person that brought the country back together again.

Edward Widmer: The phrase "the Great Emancipator" – it's not a phrase Lincoln asked to be applied to himself. And we can do better beginning with the recognition that emancipation began with the emancipated.

Keri Greenidge: Lincoln, like most white Americans at the time, was forced to reckon with slavery and its consequences due to Black people themselves.

Male Protester: *You can't trust this country to tell the truth when it comes to what happens to our people, to Black people. And, of course, a country that does that creates these types of symbols. Of course it does.*

David Reynolds: Somebody said about Abraham Lincoln, he was inwardly truly radical. However, to get ahead he had to muffle and restrain that inner radicalism.

Sean Wilentz: He wasn't being conservative, he was being political. Now, you can say that being political is a terribly immoral thing. Well, that may be true, unless you're a politician, and unless you're a president.

Female Protester #1: As a federal taxpayer we do own that statue.

Female Protester #2: We all own it, okay?

Female Protester #1: So you don't get to tear it down.

Female Protester #2: This is chocolate city, bitch. This is chocolate city, bitch. This is chocolate city.

Female protester #1: You don't get to decide for everybody.

Bryan Stevenson: What we are seeing today is really dramatic evidence of what happens when you fail to talk honestly about your history. We have to tell the truth about who we are and about how we get here.

Male Protester: That is why we are tearing this statue down...

Jelani Cobb: We can't know or understand Lincoln at the same time that we have an emotional investment in preserving him as a savior. But it is in understanding the trial and error and the failures and the shortcomings and the contradictions that he becomes most useful to us. And really, only by understanding the things he got wrong can we really grasp the magnitude and importance of the things that he got right.

Clip Two: Freedom and Equality

Narrator: On the morning of November 19th, Lincoln mounted a horse and rode to the new cemetery at Gettysburg. The crowd parted to let him through.

George Gitt, a 15-year-old local boy, hid among the large boxes underneath the speakers' dais. He waited for two hours while Edward Everett, the featured speaker, labored through his oration.

George Gitt, v/o: *When Everett finished speaking, Lincoln slowly took his hand from his chin, bent slightly forward, and very deliberately drew from an inner pocket of his coat a few flimsy pieces of paper. Tucking away the papers, he arose, and very slowly stepped to the front of the platform.*

Lincoln, v/o: *Fourscore and seven years ago our fathers brought forth, on this continent, a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal. Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived, and so dedicated, can long endure.*

We are met on a great battlefield of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting-place for those who here gave their lives, that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this. But, in a larger sense, we cannot dedicate, we cannot consecrate – we cannot hallow – this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it far above our poor power to add or detract.

The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us, the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work, which they who fought here have thus so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us – that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they here gave the last full measure of devotion – that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain – that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

Edward Widmer: The key phrase, I think it's only four words long. It's the "new birth of freedom," The early idea of America, the Constitution and the – all those millions of compromises with the South, that – that's over now, and we're going to win this war and we're going to build a better country than we ever had.

Chris Bonner: Chris What he's saying is that, "I have started to care in a new way about African Americans," that the Union is insufficient, that the Union is perhaps even meaningless without actually making real this idea that all men are created equal.

Narrator: Lincoln's speech was 272 words. But Edward Everett understood the magnitude of what he'd just heard. "I should be glad," he said, "if I came as near to the central idea of the occasion in two hours as you did in two minutes."

On the train ride home, Lincoln fell ill with a high fever; it was smallpox. Beside him was a Black man, his valet William Johnson, who had come with him to Washington from Springfield.

For the next two weeks, he tended to the ailing President. Lincoln recovered, but Johnson would not. In January 1864, he died of smallpox, likely contracted from Lincoln himself.

Though a free man who had died in the course of serving a President, Johnson never enjoyed his full rights as an American citizen.

Frederick Douglass, v/o: *Men talk about saving the Union and restoring the Union as it was. What business have we to fight for the old Union? We are fighting for something incomparably better than the old Union. We are fighting for unity; unity of idea, unity of sentiment in which there shall be no North, no South, no East, no West, no Black, no white, but a solidarity of the nation, making every slave free, and every free man a voter.*

Chris Bonner: I think that it's really important that we recognize that there's a difference between freedom and equality, and fundamentally, freed people // were not enslaved. They had that fundamental right of, you know, like liberty of person. But that was not the end. That was not all that Black folks wanted. There was an understanding that freedom and equality were different things and that both of them were desirable, that freedom itself was not enough.

The Importance of First-Person Narratives Interview Thread Transcript

Steven Hahn

I found this incredible narrative that was written by a guy named William Webb, and he was a slave who moved between Kentucky and Mississippi before the Civil War and then he published this narrative after the Civil War. And one of the things he talked about was trying to organize slaves around the election of 1856 when John C. Frémont was running and how their expectations were being elevated by the prospect of the Republican Party winning. And then, when Frémont lost, he, William Webb, talks about how slaves got together and discussed, now what do we do? And he said, some of them were in favor of rising up in rebellion and others said, "Wait four more years." Now, I read that and I thought, this is extraordinary. It wasn't simply the debate. It was that they knew everything about the cycles of American politics. They knew that there was an election of 1856, and there was going to be another one in 1860. They understood that there were these political parties, that there were parties that their owners were aligned with. They knew that the Republican Party wasn't even organized in the states where slavery was legal. And so, all of a sudden, you begin to recognize that what enslaved people are looking at is who their allies are and how they can reach out and develop those alliances. So, to some extent, they were hoping that Lincoln would win and somehow or other... So in some places, when it became announced that Lincoln was elected president, slaves just walked off the plantations thinking that this meant that slavery was over with.

Now, they had to be very, very careful, because their owners had the guns and their owners could inflict violence and their owners were not going to put up with this kind of stuff. So, all along, it was very dangerous for enslaved people to behave in what were regarded as political and therefore rebellious ways. But it helps us understand how it was that as soon as the Union Army moved into some territory in proximity to where enslaved people live, that they would be willing to take the risk and test out their understanding of what was going on politically, and little by little head to Union lines, where they thought it was possible that freedom might be there waiting for them.

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

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

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

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

Kerri Greenidge

One of the things that Frederick Douglass was very good at, was researching and collecting the stories of enslaved people like himself and finding a way to record them. So, Frederick Douglass, by 1853, edited an incarnation of his paper. It was at one time called the *North Star* then became Frederick Douglass' Paper, and then *Frederick Douglass' Monthly*.

And so, one of things that he did was to interview formerly enslaved people and tell their stories within his newspaper. And he talked to a descendant who had worked on the Washington plantation, Mount Vernon. He talked to descendants of the plantation owned by Thomas Jefferson in Virginia. And he really focused on the ways in which people emancipated and freed themselves. And that African American people for the most part were not freed by somebody. It usually happened because either they paid for their own freedom or they escaped in some way.

And so, using the stories that Douglass did to illustrate the fact that freedom required agitation and that enslaved people themselves had to constantly fight against the forces that were preventing them from realizing their freedom.

Manisha Sinha

One of the slave narratives that really caught my attention was a narrative written by an enslaved man called William Grimes. And he published a narrative in which he said that his skin could be used as parchment to write the Constitution on. And to me that was such a remarkable statement and captured so well, this incredible paradox of a Republic, a slaveholding Republic founded on ideals of universal equality and liberty and at the same time, tolerating an institution that allowed these kinds of inhumane tortures. I think Grimes' evocation of the Constitution and of his own skin, of his own body was really quite remarkable. It caught my attention. I quoted it in my book, but it showed how clearly enslaved people realized those contradictions, realized those incredible hypocrisies of confessing a belief in universal liberty, et cetera, and at the same time enslaving nearly 4 million people.

The South tried its best to sort of construct a cordon sanitaire against all abolitionists literature. They did this in the 1830s when abolitionists started mailing abolitionists' newspapers, pamphlets to the South, they had big bonfires of all abolitionist literature. They actually interfered in federal mail, which is a federal crime to interfere with the delivery of the US mail and burned abolitionist literature. So when it came to the question of slavery, there was absolutely no freedom of speech or press or thought in the South. They became increasingly closed on this question. For instance, this is not a slave narrative, but when David Walker publish his appeal to the Colored citizens of the world in 1829, this is the first abolitionists' pamphlet really that is published of the second wave of 19th-century abolition, Southern governors and mayors ask that this pamphlet be censored and that Walker be arrested. They put a price on his head. Walker unfortunately dies out of natural circumstances a couple of years later, but that's their reaction to abolitionist literature. It is complete censorship and they don't want any of this circulating in the South at all.

I think slave narratives are extremely important in just recovering Black testimony and firsthand experiences of slavery. We know the most famous of them, of course, Frederick Douglass' narrative that made slave narratives as a genre really popular and important. But long before Douglass and long after Douglass, many African Americans, men and women, wrote about their experiences in slavery, and abolitionists seized on those narratives as being an accurate portrayal of the horrors of slavery. And they printed them, they published them, they edited them. Many times narratives were actually narrated to white abolitionists who then published it, like Sojourner Truth's narrative or Harriet Tubman's narrative – they were all narrated to two white antislavery women. And I think it's important not to just see them as productions of white abolitionists. It's the way that it was dismissed by many historians, but to see it also the ways in which Black people, men and women, ordinary enslaved people talked about their experiences in slavery.

And I argue that we should see them as the movement literature of abolition. This is what comprised the literature of abolition. And it is important to give them that do in terms of their indictment of slavery. Because what most people were hearing were slaveholders, defending slavery as a benevolent institution in which they were extremely paternalistic and quote "took care of enslaved people." What you get is the polar opposite picture of course, from African Americans in these slave narratives. So extremely important, I think, to remember that the slave narratives constituted the best answer to the pro-slavery argument, to the defense of slavery that slaveholding politicians were mounting vigorously at that time. And that is why they didn't like these slave narratives. They didn't want them to be popularized.

Everyone's heard of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, but she relied on slave narratives to write that novel. And when Southerners challenged her portrayal in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, she published another book called *Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*, where she listed literally footnoted all the slave narratives that she had read that helped her write her novel. Now, there were problems with *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and its portrayal of Black people. She herself was a colonizationist like her father, but the fact remains that it is really slave narratives that inspired her to write this international bestseller, her anti-slavery novel. And she knew that. And she actually acknowledged that later on.

So Moses Roper's slave-whipping machine is something that the historian Ed Baptist has used so well to describe torture under slavery. Harriet Jacob's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* is interesting because she chose the white abolitionist she wanted to cooperate with. She rejected Harriet Beecher Stowe – she found her too paternalistic and decided to collaborate with Lydia Maria Child, another white abolitionist author, very famous actually in the 19th century – to write the *Incidents in The Life of a Slave Girl*, but there are many others. There's hundreds, literally hundreds, of slave narratives that were published at that time. And two of them really stuck with me. One is a narrative by Charles Ball, where he describes the way in which he is sold and resold and the harsh regimen of the cotton regime in the lower South. It's one of those narratives that is not really well known, but I think is really quite remarkable.

Charles Ball wrote about not only how he was being sold, he wrote about the way the cotton system worked in cotton plantations. The ways in which cotton that was picked by enslaved people was weighed and if it didn't meet a certain measurement, they would be whipped.

Very much similar to what Solomon Northup describes in Twelve Years a Slave. So I think Charles Ball's narrative, which was an early narrative published, I think at 1837 and then was republished again, after narratives became famous with the publication of Douglass' narrative was quite – one of the first to really talk about the driving regime of the cotton kingdom.

The second narrative that I was talking about– this narrative by John Brown is really interesting because he talks about medical experimentation on his skin performed by a doctor, a so-called doctor. And it really will curdle your blood when you read the descriptions of what they did to him. How they would try to peel off his skin, how they would submerge him in a pit and literally burn his skin to try to find a cure for sunburns. And so that was a narrative that grabbed my attention. And I recently wrote an essay on scientific racism and I looked at this particular slave narrative because it reminds you a little bit of the experiments the Nazi doctors like Mengele, et cetera, did in concentration camps. And it really tears down this notion that somehow slavery was this kind of paternalistic benevolent institution.

HANDOUT FOUR, LESSON THREE

Enslaved People Emancipated Themselves Interview Thread Transcript

Eric Foner

I think we will never completely get rid of the idea that Lincoln freed the slaves, and was that four or five words, and leave it at that. But of course, the freeing of the slaves, the end of slavery in the United States was the result of many, many different groups, people, causes. If you ask, "Who freed the slaves?" You can say Lincoln, you can say Congress, with all sorts of measures against slavery. You could say slaves themselves, by fleeing to the Union lines, starting in the beginning of the war, and then enlisting in the Union Army. Without their participation, slavery would not have ended. But the answer really is all of the above.

An institution like slavery, which was, you know, sometimes we don't quite realize how big and powerful it was. It was by far the most important economic institution in the United States in 1860. The richest people in the United States were the big slave owners in the South. Slavery produced the cotton that was the main export of the United States. To end an institution, you know, it's not just a question of emancipating individual people. It's destroying a very deeply entrenched institution, and that required the action of everybody, almost. So, you know, I do not want to denigrate Lincoln's role in changing the nature of the Union war effort from preserving the Union to preserving the Union and liberating the slaves. That was a crucial change, which came with the Emancipation Proclamation.

But in and of itself, it certainly did not guarantee that slavery would end. Later, you needed a constitutional amendment, the 13th Amendment, which abolished slavery everywhere in the country, including those states and regions that the Emancipation Proclamation had excluded from emancipation. So I think, you know, one has to just say, "It's very complicated how slavery ended in this country."

Until recently, I would say historians did largely ignore the contribution of African American people to the ending of slavery. But I think that has changed in the last generation, partly because of a very important project that was established at the University of Maryland, the Freedmen and Southern Society Project, which gathered together thousands of documents from the National Archives and told the story of the Civil War from the perspective of the slaves themselves. I think there's been a lot of literature lately on the role of Black soldiers, on the role of Black women in combating slavery on the plantations. So I don't think it would be fair to say that this part of the story is ignored, but it certainly gets less attention than Lincoln's own actions, or maybe the actions of Congress, the radical Republicans in Congress. And, you know, all of these facets of the story have to be integrated into the larger picture.

Chris Bonner

One of the first things that I'm thinking about in terms of how slave owners tried to compel labor, and how enslaved people tried to sort of work against it: in cotton-producing regions, slave owners would regularly require enslaved people to pick a certain weight of cotton each day. And they would weigh it at the end of the day in order to make sure that people were as productive as they were expected to be. There are incidents or there's evidence of enslaved people putting rocks and pebbles in their bags, in order to try to increase the weight. There's evidence of enslaved people sharing the fruits of their labor, and sort of shifting some cotton from their sack to a friend's sack, or a neighbor's sack, or a family member's sack in order to try to sort of make up that kind of... any sort of deficit in their burden. So there's not just a way of seeing power imposed by slave owners, but there's also a way of seeing enslaved people sort of cultivating their own kinds of power.

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I think another way to see slave owners' controls and enslaved people sort of challenging those controls, is in the landscape of the plantation. So fundamentally slavery was about making a person be in a particular place in order to do work. And so slave owners were really anxious and really invested in trying to ensure that they knew where enslaved people were, and that they could keep them in a particular space. But enslaved people regularly sort of violated those boundaries that slave owners were trying to create or construct. And one of the practices that I think is really striking is what historians have defined as truancy, or described as truancy. Enslaved people would go to the woods and hide out for a few days or maybe even a few weeks. And then eventually they would come back to a plantation and they would be punished brutally.

So in this process, like these are not enslaved people who are getting free or enslaved people who are attacking the institution of slavery, but these are enslaved people who are finding a couple of weeks where they don't have to pick cotton, finding a couple of weeks where they don't have to worry about being abused by a slave owner. Even with the knowledge of the punishment that would come, they were willing to take the risk of leaving for a few days, or a few weeks, or even a few hours just to feel that kind of momentary liberation.

Kellie Carter Jackson

I think the myth of American history is this idea that white people get to be both the villain and the hero. And so they create this chattel slavery that is quintessentially violence. Every aspect of it is violent. It's insidious. It's egregious. It is, you know, painful, and backbreaking, and psychologically traumatic. It is all of these things. And yet they're able... I mean, I think this is really the trick of, like, white supremacy or how it dupes people into thinking that Black people deserved this: that they have not earned their humanity. That they are supposed to be subordinate. They're supposed to be in this position. And look at how kind and good and great we are, for taking them in under our wing, for housing them, for feeding them. You know, there's this idea that slavery has some sort of benefit. That it makes the country prosperous. No question there. But that it's a benefit to the enslaved people themselves.

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And nothing, nothing could be further from the truth. But I think the shaping of that narrative of "I know what's best for you," that patriarchal, paternalistic idea of how white people get to determine who deserves humanity, as though it's something that can be earned or won or accomplished, is absurd. It's absurd. It makes no sense. But these ideas still, they still have weight to this very day. This idea that Black people may or may not feel pain is a concept that has played out in the medical field up until recently. You know? And so there's not a single aspect of, you know, Black lived experiences that's not somehow curated by white violence, or oppression, or white supremacy. And I think that is the great deceit, is that slaveholders can be both good and bad. Or that it's possible to be a good slaveholder.

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The idea, I think, of a good slaveholder is actually more damaging than a violent one. Right? Because if you can accept the idea of a "good slaveholder," it will keep you from questioning the system in and of itself. Because your aspiration will not be to dismantle the institution. Your aspiration will, just be a good planter. Just be a good master. Right? And I think that's what a lot of Americans want. It's like, we don't really want to get rid of white supremacy. Just be kind. Just be nice. As though all of racism is inculcated in the inward and impolite behavior.

Edna Greene Medford

Well, we sometimes think that because the majority of African Americans did not have voting rights in the period, in the antebellum period specifically, that there was no political voice. And that's not true. Because people are able to express themselves politically in many other ways other than just by voting. And so in terms of their involvement in the abolitionist movement, they're on the anti-slavery lecture circuit, they're traveling all over the North. They're not going the South, but they're traveling all over the North campaigning against slavery. But they're doing more than that.

It's not just about ending slavery. It's about elevating their positions to that of white men and women as well. So people who are already free are pushing for that equality. So they are concerned that they can't ride on the streetcars in the same way. You know, they have to be on the outside. Even if it's inclement weather, they can't get inside of the streetcar. They can't send their children to schools in the North in many instances, in an integrated way. They don't have access to jobs, to some of the better jobs. They don't have access to decent housing in many instances. So they are pressing for those kinds of things. They're doing it in terms of speeches. Douglass, certainly, is constantly talking about those kinds of things. Not just slavery, but equal rights as well.

They're trying to make America live up to the tenets that it claims were important to the founding of the nation. You have women who were very much involved in that political movement as well. So you've got Black women writing, just as Black men are. Although we don't know a lot about them, we have to dig sometimes. But because of the scholarship in the last 10 or 15 years in women's studies, especially in women's history, we are uncovering those kinds of things.

You have Black men who are speaking from the pulpit, who had newspapers. They're publishing in newspapers. You're having people write into newspapers. There's all of this agitation going on. And in fact, since the 1830s, you have a Negro Convention Movement, where they are meeting nationally to discuss the issues that affect Black America. That's a political movement to me. They're involved in party politics. You know, the Liberty Party, for instance, where they can vote. You know, they are voting. There are very few of them who are voting, but where they can, they do. But there are all of these ways in which they are very much involved in a political movement.

How Historical Narratives are Constructed Interview Thread Transcript

Chris Bonner

I could see a way in which Lincoln being seen as the "Great Emancipator" and being celebrated as such is a suggestion that, and is sort of analogous to, this feeling that emancipation is the end, that all Black folks needed was freedom, that belief that freedom was the thing, that freedom was the only thing, that belief I think has been profoundly significant in terms of the limits of equality, the limits of justice, the limits of real and full liberation that African Americans have struggled against since the Civil War era. And so, the feeling that Lincoln is the architect of emancipation and ought to be celebrated for emancipation alone, I think, is parallel to this feeling that emancipation alone was enough. And we know that emancipation was not enough, that freedom and equality were different things, and one was secured during the war and one was left to be fought for decades.

To take this myth of Lincoln as the "Great Emancipator," if we think about Lincoln solely as that, as a person who freed the slaves, as the saying goes, what we lose is the reality of Lincoln as a thoughtful leader, as a person who was listening, who was reflecting, who was introspecting and trying to decide how he felt about emancipation and what he could do about emancipation. And so, when we see Lincoln as the "Great Emancipator" and suggest that, "Oh, he just freed the slaves because he could," we overlook all of the things that he did that we should want our leaders and we should want all of our people to do, which is to think and reflect and be considerate of other people and their ideas and their needs. And so, I think Lincoln looks better as a person who gradually came to embrace emancipation as a policy than he does as a person who just freed the slaves because he always hated slavery. It's much more impressive to me to see him as evolving.

Kerri Greenidge

So Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's critique really had to do with the fact that African American people had been in the country since the country's founding, that the country belonged to Black people as much as if not more than it did to white people, and that Black people could rebuild and reframe the country in a way that reflected the ideals that were in place in the 18th century, but never came to fruition. Harper was also somebody who really believed that education of the formerly enslaved was the way that you were going to build up African American communities. You were going to create an educated populace that would then vote and be able to represent themselves in Congress and in the halls of government. So someone like a Frances Harper was very critical of colonization as were many abolitionist spokeswomen during the time.

One of the things that not just Frances Ellen Watkins Harper but other African Americans pointed to about Lincoln, is that they mistrusted this notion that he was somebody who took on the currents of whatever it was other white men were saying at the time, that there was a criticism that he didn't have really original thoughts about slavery and how to end it, that it was really something that, although he was anti-slavery, that's not to say that he wasn't, but he didn't have really any original ideas or takes on it. And that he was really, I think Harper's critique shows this, the idea of many African Americans was that he was merely rehashing arguments that had been made back in 1817, and not really realizing that the current had changed, that African American people themselves, the vast majority, were not going to relocate, and that this wasn't actually a plan.

Harper and others would argue, this is not a plan for rearranging American and revolutionizing American policy. It's an opinion, but it's not really a plan. So there was a lot of criticism for him for that, as Harper would point out. There was also a lot of criticism for him because the question of what were you going to do with all this land that Southerners abandoned and that Black people were still on, and that Black people were farming and in some cases were being paid to farm, and yet there's no policy enacted that puts that into law. And so when Harper is criticizing him for colonization, as when many African American abolitionists criticized Lincoln in 1862, they're not just talking and reflecting on his plan for colonization. They're really responding to the fact that the war is moving in a direction that up until early 1863 Lincoln didn't publicly acknowledge.

He didn't publicly note that the reality on the ground, Northerners, is that slavery is dissolving because Black people are fleeing and because the white South is collapsing. And so once the white South starts to collapse, the people who are running the economy, as they've always done, are the Black people who are doing the labor and continuing to produce the cotton and the rice and the sugar. So the criticism of Lincoln is not merely that he was a colonizationist in 1862, it was that he did not in many people's opinion, many radical abolitionists' opinion, did not have a foresight into what he was actually going to create once the Civil War ended.

Manisha Sinha

So I would argue that... At least that's the argument I make in my book *The Slave's Cause* where I say that we have to look of course at Black and white abolitionists as previous historians had done. But I argue that slave resistance is central to understanding the abolition movement. And that many times it is instances of slave resistance that propel the abolition movement forward, whether it's emancipation in Massachusetts or whether it's these famous instances of rebellion and resistance against the Fugitive Slave Law, or the emergence of an entire generation of leaders of the abolition movement. The fugitive slave abolitionists like Frederick Douglass, like Harriet Tubman, they were the most famous, but there was a whole generation of them that come to lead and personify the movement.

And so I would argue that slave resistance is not something that is completely separate from the history of abolition – that in fact it is central to it, and that holds true. Many British historians have argued even for British abolition. They look at famous slave rebellions that evoke the name of Wilberforce or looking at the ways in which slave rebellion propelled abolition in the British parliament. Same is true for the French. You can't talk about abolition at all without talking about the Haitian Revolution, which is of course the only instance of a successful slave rebellion in world history that established the first modern Black republic. Most abolitionists viewed the Haitian Revolution as an abolitionist revolution. And they praised it precisely for that reason. And the Haitians themselves, saw themselves as part of a broader movement. So for instance, in Haiti, when they gain their independence and they had to name some of the first mans of war, their ships, they call them Wilberforce and Clarkson after the British abolitionists. So they saw themselves as part of a broader abolition movement too. So that's the argument I make in my book, that we cannot understand the abolition movement without centering the history of slave resistance in it.

I think one of the ways in which the abolition movement was portrayed as mainly a movement of Northern whites or of the British, who were very far from slavery, was in fact the response of slaveholders. Slaveholders did not want to talk about Black abolitionists, sometimes would mention, I found in my own research, the Black Douglass versus the white Douglas, that is the Stephen Douglas who ran against Lincoln. But they tended to ignore African Americans because it did not really suit their purposes to recognize Black resistance. They portrayed the abolition movement as predominantly a movement of Northern whites who had no idea about slavery, who were hypocrites, shedding crocodile tears about slavery, blind to the injustices of their own society. They said that about the British abolitionists, they said that about Northern white abolitionists. If you recognize Afro-British abolitionists, like Olaudah Equiano or Black abolitionists like Douglass, then you would be in fact engaged in a political contest with enslaved people. And that is not something they wanted to do. That would prove their entire theory of slavery or racial slavery wrong. Because clearly these were people who were fighting for their freedom and could well argue their case.

And that unfortunately, that view of abolitionists continued, especially in the American historical profession, in the mainstream American academia, because African Americans, who were writing history outside it and writing different views of abolitionists. In fact, some of the first complementary biographies of abolitionists were written by African Americans like Archibald Grimke, like W.E.B. Du Bois. They were the ones who rescued people like John Brown, who was portrayed as a madman by most American historians. This is the time when most American historians portrayed slavery as this benevolent paternalistic institution. And they portrayed abolitionists as these crazy white Northern fanatics who had caused a needless Civil War. And that was the dominant interpretation of slavery and abolition. It is not until the Civil Rights Movement, when civil rights activists start calling themselves the new abolitionists, that we start getting more sympathetic portraits of abolitionists. But as I said, African American writers and historians had always presented an alternative picture of both slavery and abolition.

Bryan Stevenson

I mean, I just think that the multiple ways that we demonized Blackness in this country – we differentiate it between people who are Black and white in ways that were designed to maintain racial hierarchy have never really been explored. We had a narrative of racial difference from Day One, and it's part of the reason why we haven't acknowledged the genocide of indigenous people. When Europeans came to this continent, we killed millions of indigenous people, and you couldn't reconcile the famine and the disease and the war and the death and the destruction and the despair of millions of tribal communities that were disrupted by this invasion by Europeans with this concept of freedom and justice for all. So you had to create a narrative. And the narrative that was created is that indigenous people, native people, they're different, they're racially different. Those Indians are savages. And because they're racially different, the values that we hold dear – equality and justice for all – they don't apply to that population.

That then laid the groundwork for the enslavement of African people. And when Black people came, that same narrative was crafted in an even more intense and virulent way because Black people were being enslaved. We said that Black people can't do this, and Black people can't do this. Black people aren't fully human.

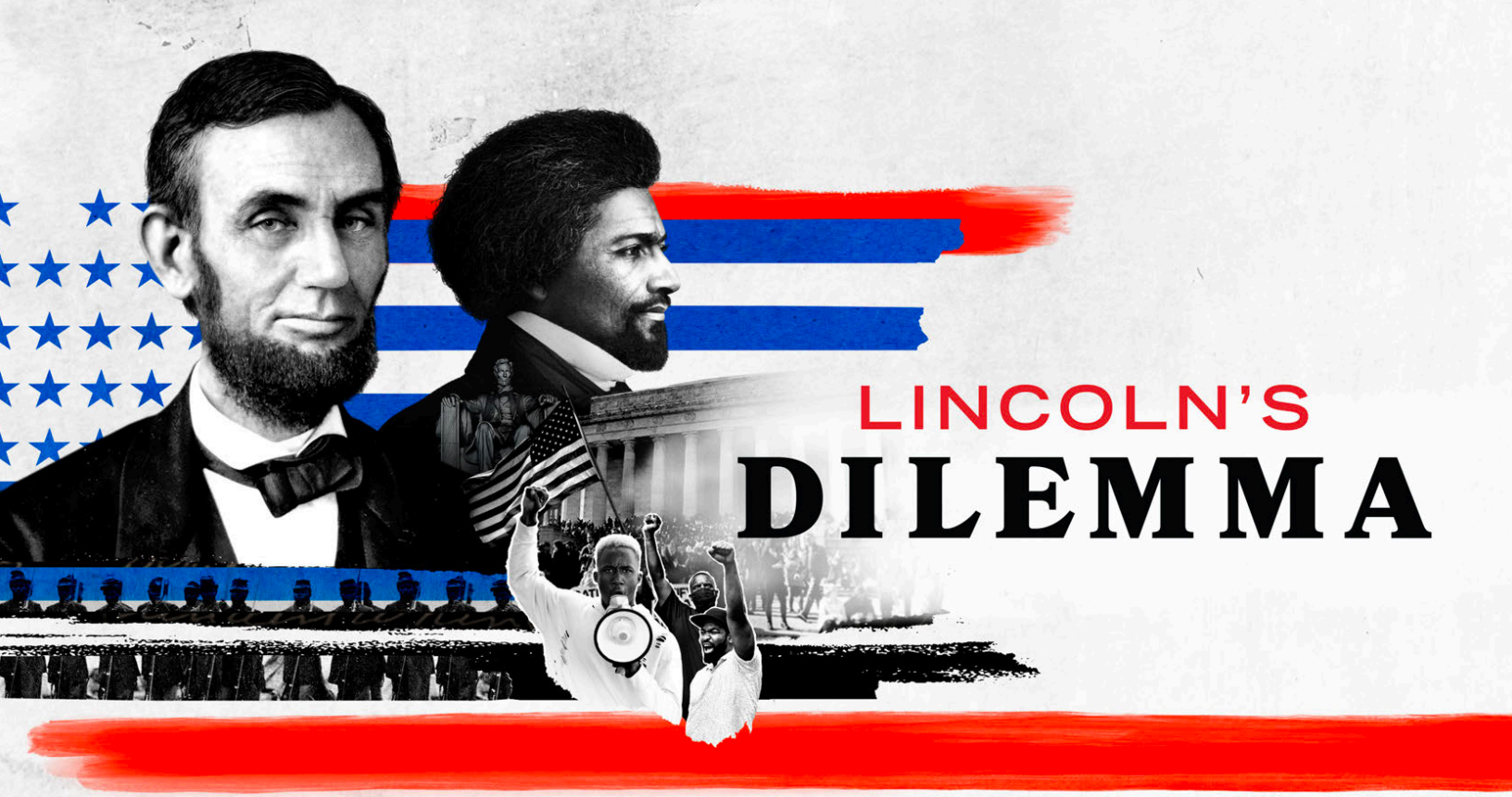
It was just interesting to me to note that in the state of Maryland, the first enslaved Africans don't get to Maryland until about 1642. And within 20 years, the state of Maryland has actually passed miscegenation laws that make it clear that white people cannot marry, cannot be in relationship with Black people. They were already creating a codified legal status to Blackness that made Black people less worthy, less valuable, something that could not be even loved in the way that we think about marriage and relationship, and that narrative played out throughout this country.

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

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

By the time the 1960s come, 1950s come, where courageous Black folks are once again pushing this country to own up to its commitment to democracy, it's a struggle because, for a lot of people, they believe that America is a place that values white people over Black people. That's their belief system. It's the reason why we have segregation. It's the reason why we disenfranchise. And when that's challenged, people get really upset. And we passed the voting rights laws and the civil rights laws, but there was never a reckoning with this basic idea, which was what caused the division during Lincoln's era, that this presumption of dangerousness and guilt that got assigned to Black and Brown people when they came to this continent, it's still here. And because of that, we're still fighting to overcome that presumption. We're still trying to get people to reckon with this legacy of white supremacy, this ideology of white supremacy, these narratives of racial difference.

And until we do that, Black and Brown people are going to be menaced by police officers. They're going to be disproportionately victimized in various systems, in health systems, in educational systems. And it's why I think understanding this period in American history, when we thought we were dealing with the issue, needs to be re-evaluated.



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