ABIGAIL COOPER
LINCOLN'S DILEMMA
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

Abigail Cooper Interview
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Interviewed by Jackie Olive & Barak Goodman
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START TC: 00:00:00:00

CREW MEMBER:

Abigail Cooper interview. Take one. Mark. Okay, everyone. Cell phones on silent.

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Abigail Cooper

HISTORIAN, BRANDEIS UNIVERSITY

The United States' reliance on slavery

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ABIGAIL COOPER:

Slavery is absolutely central to the entire US economy. Cotton is 60% of the exports, of US exports, on the eve of the Civil War, 1860. So you are looking at- that's $200 million in cotton exports. And to give you some idea of the scale of how important enslaved people as property are, they are worth $3.5 billion.

That's in 1860 money. That would be 110 billion today. And that's why New York actually doesn't ... They see secession coming, they say, "We want to be neutral, we don't want to be part of a Union. We want to continue trading because Wall Street is ..." and New Orleans I mean, the slave trade is absolutely central to New York financiers. They can't even imagine what the U.S. will look like without slavery. So it's not a Southern institution, and it's not a kind of marginal or you know, appendage to the U.S. economy, it is absolutely central.

ABIGAIL COOPER:
American slavery, it lives and breathes through the chattel principle. The chattel principle is saying it's basically like livestock. It's the idea that, "This is a labor, we purchase the labor, but the labor side is inside the person. And so it's a person but it's also property." And that paradox is so hard to fathom. But it's property in the sense that people can actually borrow its collateral. It is part of the entire state. It's why there is such incredible wealth coming out of the South. And then you also have this idea of oneself, I mean, enslaved people themselves, they know how much they're worth.

ABIGAIL COOPER:
They even understand, between each other, and that's why they're trying to figure out how they define their worth and it's usually in religious terms. To be able to kind of restore their own humanity, even though there's a system that really wants to put a money value on them, and the money value that atomizes them away from their communities. It's a way that says, "You're not a family member, you are able to be pulled away, because you are just like an ox or you are like a living thing." And it's funny because no enslaved person believes themselves to be anything like the livestock that they are tasked with minding. But they have to be able to speak that language to the people who think they're being paternalistic, who think they're being fathers and mothers. And that

becomes a way of also protecting their families, to be able to buy into that is to be able to perhaps get enough favor so you don't become that atomized single person on the auction block.

ABIGAIL COOPER:
As cotton is booming, once you have the cotton gin, that's why all the founders said it's going to die out is because well, tobacco was depleting the land in Virginia and that was the reason they had slavery. But once you have the cotton gin, you have the expansion of cotton through the Southwest. And then you have a sudden need for more slave labor. And once you have that, then you have ... Well, we need to move all of the slaves on the East Coast to the southwest, and so into Alabama, and to Mississippi, into Louisiana, into Texas. And that's when you see people from Virginia are being sold away into the Deep South. That's why being sold down river is such a terrifying horror story. And Virginia's economy is then- it's not tobacco anymore, it's people.

ABIGAIL COOPER:
And that's where you start seeing one in three children lose a parent in Virginia. You're seeing in Mississippi, it's like a 10-year-old neighborhood because the community is all displaced people. That's what you're seeing and that's what people know how to expect. They even know the cues of when they might be sold away. And that's also why you're not seeing whole families leaving during the Antebellum period because people don't think they can get away. The patrol system is so strong. Any police force there is, it's all about keeping enslaved people in. And so, only single people can get away but they can't get away and bring their whole families.

The Fugitive Slave Act

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ABIGAIL COOPER:

Before 1850, the idea of going to Philadelphia, the idea of going to Ohio, the idea of just getting away, 1835 to 1850, you're seeing the abolitionist movement starting to really get some steam behind it, and you're starting to see those networks. And so people start learning what those are. 1850 makes it completely different because all of a sudden, you don't just have to get to Philadelphia, you have to get to Canada. And that's huge. That's way harder. And the other thing about that is that you don't just have slave patrollers, you do have slave patrollers. In fact, that's a way that planters, people who own slaves, can get poor, white people who don't own any slaves to be in their pocket, to be kind of allied with them. That's how they're going to feed their families. And so, you have a patrol system. And then you also have a slave hunting system. People who can go into the north and take any Black person off of the street. And then they are currency, they have a market value. You can sell in Richmond, you can sell in D.C., you can sell in New Orleans. And so that becomes a game changer. 1850, that compromise, just all of a sudden turns Black communities who also felt like they were safe, felt like they were property owning, it turns them into people who are afraid. Afraid for their children, afraid for the kind of power they can amass. And it also gives Roger Taney the ability in 1857, to say, "Well, Black people have no rights that white men are bound to respect." And once that happens, then the kind of ambiguous nature of citizenship completely gets upended. And he's declaring that America is a white nation and its citizens should be white. And that- the Fugitive Slave Law makes that possible. It's really a stepping stone to all kinds of connections between a police force that imagines a white nation and then- the highest law of the land saying it's a white nation.

ABIGAIL COOPER:

You all of a sudden, have the ability, I mean, the Solomon Northup story is all about how it can happen to anyone. And that becomes a way of saying this is also the North allying with the South and saying our economic interests are married. You might have a small subset, the kind of the annoying, moralizing abolitionists were saying this is wrong. But most people are saying this is profitable. And everyone's wearing cotton, I mean Waltham, Boston, Massachusetts, Lowell, that's where textiles are being manufactured. Everyone feels like they are benefiting from this. And so, it's hard for people to say they're going to go against their interest and say, "Black people's safety isn't important to me." And especially with immigrants, especially Irish immigrants, and German immigrants who are coming in, and they want to be a new labor force. And they see themselves as competing with Black labor. And therefore, they are also very quickly signing up for the Democratic ticket, very quickly telling the Democratic congress people that anything you can do that's anti-Black, that'll get Black people out, we're with you, because we want that work.

Enslaved people's growing political awareness and organizing

01:08:19:00

ABIGAIL COOPER:

I have to say what I've loved so much about ... I read a lot of interviews with formerly enslaved people from the late 19th century into the 20th century, and they all have different stories of someone reading the paper. So you have 1834, it's illegal to read, it's illegal for a slave to read. But at the same time, you still have people who ... There'll be one person who knows how to read, and they're also hearing their master and mistress talk about what's in the newspaper. They know the name Frémont because they know he's a republican candidate, and

they heard their master and mistress say that he's going to free the slaves. So they get excited in 1856. What's happening, hear the murmurs, there's a grapevine network that says, "Frémont. Listen for Frémont. Okay. Okay, Lincoln. We hear Lincoln is a Black Republican." There's a mistress who actually writes in January 1861 that all the slaves think Lincoln is to free them, and they generally think he's a Black man. And that's what you have, you have people hear Black Republican and think he's Black. And all of a sudden, they've allied themselves with that interest, they see that, "This is a man who, whatever it is, he's made our owners very nervous. And we are going to watch and hear every time there's anything going on where this guy's name is mentioned, we're going to pay attention."

ABIGAIL COOPER:
Lincoln's election is a catalyst for information exchange. It's a catalyst for the grapevine network. Once that happens, people are starting to scheme, they're starting to plan, they're starting to pray. And it's the Hush Harbor, which is- the Hush Harbor is this place that is the woods, the brush, the swamp where enslaved people go and worship and pray and also exchange information. So the Hush Harbor is really starting to percolate during this time. Once you have the November 1860 election, you're already seeing people's- there's a comet in 1860, there's all kinds of meteorological activity going on. People are looking for signs and they're exchanging information. And once they start doing this, they start saying, "Okay, so the guy they didn't want to get elected got elected. And now all of this stuff is happening." They talk about a blood moon, there's- and then they also talk about how there's going to be war. They start hearing about war. In South Carolina, it secedes almost immediately. And then all of a sudden, six other states follow suit. And once that happens, you have people ... You can't do anything in the South without Black laborers knowing what's going on. And

they even start moving some of the labor into different directions, that are war directed “build fortifications. Come over here. This is what you need to do, you need to go with the oldest white male and to the front. And once that happens, and those are family separations, once that happens, people start scheming for leaving and also trying to find ways to stay in touch with each other. Because that's what they're most afraid of, is that if their families are going to be taken away from each other, if they are going to even flee the Yankees and take the most valuable slaves with them, then there's already family separations happening. People are worried about that. And that is what makes them want to say, "Okay, if we're going to be separated anyway, then we need to figure out how we're going to leave." And that happens both in them running to Union lines, and also splitting off from owners who tried to move them.

Frederick Douglass

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ABIGAIL COOPER:

Frederick Douglass has to be the megaphone for four million enslaved people. And the burden Douglass bears is that even Lincoln himself believes that Black people aren't smart enough to be citizens and they are perhaps a different species. Scientific racism is just starting and it's getting all kinds of stamps of approval from – The American Medical Association just starts 1846. And now you have, at the same time that that's happening and they're starting to really create a science around Africans as other. You also have Frederick Douglass here, clearly, an African descendant who's saying, "There's nothing wrong with our brains." And he has to go into spaces where he's looked at, as perhaps he might be another species and plead for his intellect. And then he goes on to perform incredible feats of oration. I mean, there's something about Douglass

that when you see the way he shapes a metaphor or the way he comes out and talks about what it's like to be a slave, what it's like to be a Black man in America and still want to claim America. He's speaking in tones that abolitionists, all of a sudden, see a cause. For so many, he defines the cause, because a lot of abolitionists are already starting to doubt their own Christianity. There's a huge kind of Unitarianism moving away from the old Puritan faith and wondering, having a huge crisis of conscience. What's our purpose? What are we doing here? What is America?

ABIGAIL COOPER:
And for that moment, they see their own prosperity is completely premised on the suppression, the oppression of Black people. And here, Frederick Douglass is giving first hand accounts of what it was like to have to fight with fist and to fight tooth and nail, fight fist to fist with a slave breaker, to be able to be the voice that takes all these other voices of enslaved people and tries to amplify them. But he also is somebody who has to be so exceptional to prove that and then the bind he's in is that the only way he can make Black people intelligible- the only way he can make Black people intelligible is by being exceptional. And then therefore, the only way that ... You know, the intelligentsia of Boston really understands is with that kind of performance.

Harriet Beecher Stowe

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ABIGAIL COOPER:

Harriet Beecher Stowe is coming from- oh, this is the Beecher family. I mean, the Beecher family is just legend because you have Henry Beecher, you have Lyman

Beecher, you have basically all the Puritan architects, the brain of America. And you have Katherine Beecher who is really the true womanhood icon of America, really trying to say women's rights should be domestic. Henry Beecher being kind of America's preacher. Speaking for a kind of liberal ethos and against slavery. So Harriet Beecher Stowe is the face of what a lot of scholars call romantic racialism. And that is when you take a lot of romantic storytelling, a lot of romantic visions of incredibly docile, sweet-natured, Christ-like and Christian-like slaves who will do anything and will die and give their all for someone else, for some sweet child, for someone who is seen as more of the hero, which is usually a white figure. And so there is though, a suddenness in which *Uncle Tom's Cabin* just takes the world by storm. I mean, it's passed around as- big book clubs. It's the television of the 19th century. I mean, this is when novels, now we tried to get our kids to read novels, but I mean, novels were the primetime entertainment.

ABIGAIL COOPER:

So Harriet Beecher Stowe ends up being this bestseller and people didn't know. It was a revelation, people had normalized it. And so understanding this for as exaggerated as it might be, and as problematic as the characterizations are, it brought an awareness of slavery as a blight, and that exacerbated the tensions. To make Abolitionism no longer the fringe, a kind of leftist, crazy movement, instead, to bring it to the center. That was really- it's why Lincoln says, "This is the little lady who started the war," because, I mean, she wrote the book that made everybody say, "Maybe abolitionism is for me, too." And then all of all a sudden, other women at home could say, "Maybe I'm political." And you know, so, that, in and of itself, made a lot of white men who own slaves very nervous.

The emergence of "Contraband" policy

01:18:03:00

ABIGAIL COOPER:

Frank Baker, James Townsend, and Shepard Mallory, they are building fortifications in Norfolk near Fort Monroe. And they know that they are going to be moved South, to North Carolina, then to Florida. They're going to be moved away from their families and they know they might not ever see them again. And the union is right there, right across just a boat's trip away. They get in a boat under cover of darkness and they row to Fort Monroe and they take their chances. And they are held there overnight. And Benjamin Butler talks to them. The owner sends some Confederates to go fetch them and comes under a white flag of truce, expecting that he will ...Butler will, of course, return these fugitive slaves because of the Fugitive Slave Act. And that had been happening already in Maryland. People had returned slaves, that was expected. But Butler pauses and says, "Okay, they're building fortifications across the water and they are an obvious boon for our enemy. I'm going to, as a lawyer, take a page out of international law and say, "You know, you Confederates say you're a foreign country, and if you're a foreign country, then does the fugitive slave law really apply to you? I say it doesn't. So here is a receipt for your enslaved men. And you may pick them up when you decide to stop having an insurrection."

ABIGAIL COOPER:

And that is really what- what he decides too is that they are contraband. He can't call them people. He can't say these are human beings with rights. He's going to say, "This is property. And as property, I can confiscate any property

that I believe is being used against the United States of America." And because he does that, that “contraband” decision, which really heightens their propertiness, that heightens the idea that this is I mean, a slave, you think of a slave as a person, but you don't think of “contraband” as a person. It's a gun, it's drugs. It's not a person. But he uses that trick to say this non-person is going to now be working for me. And it's really that transfer of labor and that idea of the identity of contraband as in between, that creates a legal switch over to allow people to come into lines. It's May 24th, 1861. Butler decides, "Okay, we're doing this “contraband” thing. We're going to, you know, make ..." He makes the “contraband” decision and then he writes to Washington. But at that point, you have those three men coming May 24th. Well, it takes about a week for more people. They just come in, they start coming in in droves. You have Hampton right there. And Hampton is going to be the site of Hampton University, and people are coming by the land bridge. And they're rowing anything they can find. And once you get to June, you've got 900 people there. So he writes back to Washington but it takes Congress until August 1861.

ABIGAIL COOPER:
And then they'd say, "Okay, first Confiscation Act, you may- we were going to say, you may confiscate any people as property, any “contraband” people who are working for the Confederacy." So it's already conditional. Everyone is kind of on eggshells, and Lincoln especially. Lincoln is so worried about those border states. That he is absolutely, you know, just putting down right and left at the same time that the Congress passes the Confiscation Act. Well, Frémont is declaring martial law in Missouri and saying, "Well, I'm going to have black men join a regiment and then that will help me do what I need to do in Missouri and suppress this Confederate government." But Lincoln says “no,” and removes Frémont from his position. And Congress is saying that with the first confiscation act, "You can only take people who are working for the

Confederacy." Now on the ground, mistresses and masters are writing everywhere, saying they will take any biscuit maker and bring them in and say they're working for the Confederacy. But it's not just their choice. Really, the people on the ground have already come. And even if they turn them out of their lines, they're making tent cities, they're making shacks, they're making huts, they're rebuilding towns, and taking the land for themselves. They're not just building towns, or even they're planting, they're planting gardens because they know the cycle. And they know they're going to have to feed themselves. And this is going to be a huge boon for the army because they can't find food. And so it's already the, you know, Black Exodus.

ABIGAIL COOPER:
And already Congress is reacting to what Black people are doing on the ground. They see the army there and that's enough. That's enough to make owners nervous and make the Confederacy have to fight a war on two fronts. Are they going to allocate resources to keeping enslaved people inside the plantation or are they going to send that manpower off to the front? And once that choice is live, then you've got a weakened Confederacy, and you've got the possibility of the union making use of Black labor, Black people. But it's very narrow-minded. It only sees Black men as a force. It doesn't see the families, it doesn't see the networks as a boon. But they are, they could be if they use them. Midwives are a medical force. And boy, it takes a long time. 1864, surgeons are writing, "These midwives know everything, please give us more resources to deputize them." But it's really hard because it does not compute for generals and it's hard for Congress to catch on, too.

The opportunity to seize freedom

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ABIGAIL COOPER:

There's two things going on and you can see that dialectic between Black people on the ground and Congress. But Congress doesn't really understand the plantation nation, it doesn't understand the logics. And a lot of Black people have already, in the Hush Harbor, been planning for when that door cracks enough, when they can seize their freedom for generations. Since 1619, their ancestors have been saying, "An enslavement, the slave status, that's not a legitimate identity. That's not a legitimate status." And so they've been plotting but they have always known that their family members had to be part of the equation. And so now, what they see is if we can get away as families, if we can plot a space for ourselves, even sometimes when Confederates are fleeing, when they flee, they're trying to say, "How can we remake the south into a New Canaan? How can we turn our Exodus into this thing where we move and we connect with people? We look for people who we've lost in the slave trade." And, that's where also they're looking at the Union as a portal to reconnect their families and to make the South the Black south, because you have only about 200,000 free Black people in the North. You have 4.2 million Black people in the South. It's almost half the population.

ABIGAIL COOPER:

And they also know that that self can't bloom unless they are there. So they really make use of the resources and they use the Union to their own ends. But already, they're weakening the Confederacy by doing so. And a lot of times, it becomes brokering between the Union and the Confederacy to get their own aims, to get land and to get back to their families.

“Contraband” camps

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ABIGAIL COOPER:

“Contraband” camp is all kinds of different refugee spaces, where the Union has said, "Okay, this is where I see Black people are doing something for themselves, or how I've decided that we're going to create a in between space for people who I'm going to name ‘contraband’." And “contraband” camps emerge on the landscape as these in between spaces, in between slavery and freedom. And they become, at the beginning, places where there are men, women, and children. And over time, they're going to turn into places where it's mostly women and children or old and disabled people. Because men's labor after the Emancipation Proclamation becomes really important. Men's service to the country becomes really important so they get moved around. But what happens in these camps is people start planning for what their freedom is going to look like. It's a rehearsal for reconstruction, it's an opportunity for people to say, "This is what I want. This is the information that I can get."

ABIGAIL COOPER:

And also at the time for them to finally be able to read, it's time for them to finally be able to worship the way they want. One man says, "We've been scrubbing underground for years, now the bushel's off the light." So it's a time for them to say, "We're going to show people what we're made of." And they're not going to be able to put it back together again. And that's really where you see even after Lincoln's assassinated, they said, "We weren't scared of going back to slavery because we had already taken an oath that as long as we got blood in our veins, we weren't going back. There was no way." And so everything they do is really positioned to make sure slavery doesn't go back the way it was

before and they are not put in that position. And it's really hard because there's still a slave trade going on in Texas, it's going on in Cuba, Brazil. The whole idea of the Confederacy is, "We're going to make a modern slave holding Republic and it's going to be the best labor system in the world, and we're going to export it," and they keep trying to keep it alive. And that idea that's why you have Confederados in Brazil, the idea of continuing slavery into the 20th century was the vision.

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ABIGAIL COOPER:

These refugee spaces are- sometimes they're swamps, sometimes they're woods, sometimes what they're doing is they're looking for places where statelessness is their best chance. And they are looking for ways to scrape out a living for themselves. In other places, they are brokering with the Union and they are trying to figure out how do they build institutions? How do they build institutions on the landscape so that they have a future? Because there's already a huge colonization act going on. And the idea and very much the brainchild of Lincoln himself is, if there's going to be freedom, immediate emancipation now, then we can't have Black people stay in the nation, we have to export them. So compensated emancipation comes with $100 for any Black person who'll leave. And it's a chance for people in these camps to say, "That's not going to be us. We're not going to go abroad. We're going to make our mark right here where our ancestors are buried." And so they want to invest in schools, they want to invest in churches, because if they can't get land then they want to make sure that they still have something that they can call their own. And they very much want to make land the aim. And it's why you have so many men are really ambivalent about conscription, because they're ambivalent about enlistment and being soldiers. Because those three-year contracts are going to take them away from women and children, wives, mothers. And that is going to be hard to put back together again.

ABIGAIL COOPER:
And they don't really have citizenship rights, and all they have to do, they have to take Yankee's word for it, that they're going to take care of extended families, that they're going to send back wages, and that's really difficult. But for that sliver of a moment, they got to see that they could build something and they amazingly work out with each other. We're going to have communal gardens, we're going to– And we're each going to have acreage for ourselves, "We're going to have eight acres for ourselves," and they kind of plot out how they're going to have modest small farms. It's really far more of Jefferson's dream than any Southern planters do, is that Black people become small farmers, and really fight to have those land claims after the war.

ABIGAIL COOPER:
The white Union Army and Black people who are in these refugee camps, who are in these contraband camps, they have different relationships in different places. But in general, most union soldiers are something to fear and be careful because a lot of union soldiers will sell you to any slave hunters who want to find some quick cash on a still existing slave market. But you have an army of missionaries and you have a superintendence of “contrabands”. So you have a lot of chaplains who get kind of redirected to become kind of contraband superintendence. And once that happens, you have a little bit more organization. And then you do have white soldiers who are starting to be converted to the idea that, "Okay, maybe this is a war for emancipation, not just the Union. And yeah they fight really well, and yeah they know how to cook and it's way better than what I just tried to make out of these rations." And you have laundresses and you have ..." But you also have all kinds of people writing back home saying, "Hey, I can get a Black person to be a servant. Do you want one?" And so there's all kinds of ways in which Black mothers have to be protecting their children all the time because white soldiers can't just aggregate the people

from the price. They see, all of a sudden, this kind of, "Wow, even a guy like me." And that's really dangerous and that's where you really have a lot of friction between the different communities.

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ABIGAIL COOPER:

Can you have- also people who have their own property even though they are considered property? On a customary level, they've long had property. That's my grandmother's quilts. I know that's my cow. They build gardens. They know how to grow gardens. And Yankee soldiers see that as, "Great. Excellent. Thank you for growing that garden. That's mine." And that's another tension because Black people understand property between each other, but white people don't see it. White Southerners see it more than the white Northerners do, and so you really have to figure out, "Okay, how do I make this translatable to white missionaries and then to quartermasters, and then to soldiers who might come along and see me in all kinds of different ways?" And especially soldiers who are out and who haven't seen women for a long time. You know, we think of the west as having the kind of the bordello and the saloon. Well, the southern slaveholders have long kind of touted their own genius. They say, "We don't need to have bordellos in the South because we have slavery." It's just kind of a sick admission but they're just saying it openly. Well, of course, because it's been institutionalized. It's part of a peculiar institution and it's also part of all of your profits. Because since we closed the slave trade in 1807, we have since needed to create more laborers. And since slave descent follows the mother, well, it's been part of the kind of plantation regime. And a lot of people haven't seen that as something that stops with the war. It's not something that stops even with word of emancipation. And that's really dangerous for a lot of Black women who are trying to say, "I want to protect myself in freedom."

Lincoln's gradual evolution towards emancipation

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ABIGAIL COOPER:
Even though I cannot get into Lincoln's head, I can still say that all of his moves are so practically-minded. He's thinking like a lawyer, and he's very much aware he's in D.C. where slavery is still legal. Slave people- I mean, the slave trade has stopped but you still have enslaved people until April 1862. So that first inaugural is happening when he knows that slave people are right there. He also knows New York. As I said, New York wants to secede, too, because they make their money. He knows how much the economy is bound up in slavery and he knows- he wants the union to stay together. But all those practical decisions, he's been investing in emancipation because he sees the west is not a place that slavery can spread. He long has seen the west as a place where he wants to see white homesteading. And that's kind of an important point, because the difficulty with Lincoln is that he might be anti-slavery, but he's not exactly pro-Black. He sees the problem of slavery as America's problem, but he doesn't disaggregate that from Black people. He should see Black people as an asset instead of a liability, but he tries to get Black people to leave the country because he can't imagine a biracial republic. He can't imagine the idea of Black people flourishing in America, and he tries to get them to leave and tells them, "It'll be selfish of you not to."

ABIGAIL COOPER:
And that is very much a kind of- there's all kinds of moral stains on Lincoln for failure of imagination, but I think what's hard is he's always moving in a practical vein. He's always moving in a conciliatory vein. And when you get to him deciding on emancipation, you know, when Seward says, "It's a puff of wind to an already accomplished fact," it's acknowledging that Fremont, David Hunter

in South Carolina, Felts down in New Orleans, there are already people on the ground who are trying to enlist Black regimens, and that- I mean, Butler moves from his contraband decision in Fort Monroe and then he moves down to New Orleans and also says, "Yeah, we should arm Black people."

ABIGAIL COOPER:
So once he starts getting enough people saying, "Okay, you should do this." He's willing to put it out there. But he's still offering them an olive branch, you know, "Hey, just come on back. We'll compensate you." And it's not about, "Okay, we will accept the transfer of labor, of Black labor from the South to the North and we'll make a killing on it." He instead says, "No, we can make everything go back the way it was, as long as you just accept that you're part of the Union." And that's really where you're seeing Lincoln. And Lincoln as a figure who's willing to support colonization up until April 1865. He's still- He talks to Butler trying to get Butler to colonize Black people in Haiti. I will also say, because this is another piece that I want, Lincoln could have opened relations with Haiti, but he didn't until he was really thinking about, "Can we make colonization happen?" So with emancipation, he's thinking of colonization and he's thinking of Haiti as a place to recolonize Black Americans. And so he's not really interested in creating Black networks unless they're useful to him. He's interested in a very practical approach to emancipation.

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ABIGAIL COOPER:
I think that Lincoln is somebody who, when you read him, you can't help but feel some admiration, because, you know, in the American presidency, it's a really

vexed legacy. And everyone before him has a lot to answer for. And so, you know, Lincoln is that one president. We say, "Okay, you can like that one." But the thing about Lincoln is that you can call him a man of his times or you can say, you know, he just absorbed it. But he's- he is like a lot of kind of self-made white men. Somebody who sees his own virtue as part of that white male legacy and he can't see past it. And he will kind of grudgingly give like, "Well, Frederick Douglass does seem smart." But he's still in his, you know, in his debates, in everything he says publicly, he still affirms in all kinds of sideways ways, you know, "They might not be as morally or intellectually good as we are." And so he constantly creates all kinds of distance, almost as a way to, you know, "If I'm going to be on this emancipation plank then I need to grease the rails with kind of a couple more really openly anti-Black or suspicious of Black people language." And so it's always hard because his emancipation message always is clouded by a lot of, "All right, all right, but this is from military necessity. Should I put something moral? Okay, I'll put something moral in." There's not a real like, "The drumbeat of abolition is deep in my soul." It's far more of, "Okay, I believe that every man should be able to do what I did and have the fruit of one's own labor, and have some education, and be able to expand into the West." But he doesn't see that as a Black man's journey. He doesn't see kinship, he doesn't see camaraderie or a nation that should be inherited by Black people.

ABIGAIL COOPER:
I believe he becomes more convinced of slavery as a moral wrong. And he uses the language very much of slavery as a moral wrong more and more. And that's important, but the fact that he continues to try to plot for colonization, the fact that he really is thinking that if he continues and, you know, had he not been assassinated, he wants to think about what reconstruction of the South is going

to look like, his 10% plan, his ideas for reconstruction, it's very forgiving to white people in the South for slavery. Even as he recognized it's going to be the plague that they had to rid themselves of, the kind of- the original sin that they had to reckon with, he's still willing to bring those people back into power, and he's still willing to say, "We're not going to have a revolution." When he could have been the revolutionary figure. And who he is, is so different from the way he's used by a lot of enslaved people. And that, when you see the vision that Black people use Lincoln for, then you recognize a disconnect between the man who has a lot of different people talking in his ear, a lot of different people he had to placate, and I feel sympathetic to that. But it's nowhere near what could have been, because he never saw all of the kind of intellectual history of freedom coming from Black people themselves.

Lincoln as a symbol

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ABIGAIL COOPER:
Black people and America, for most Black people in America, America has been the force that has enslaved them. The reason why Jefferson said, "We've got a wolf by the ears," was because he said, "There's no way that Black people in America can love this country. They can't have patriotism because the country has been responsible for their enslavement, for the selling of their children." And so there's a huge tension between any white person who encounters a Black person during the Civil War. What do they know? When one color skin can enslave another color of skin, what does that mean? And so Lincoln ends up being this kind of watchword of like, "Hey, who do you pray for?" Becomes a kind of way of figuring out Black loyalty. And to say, "I pray for Lincoln. I pray Lincoln will win. I pray for Lincoln's army to win." Lincoln becomes that one

word that you can use to try to establish the beginnings of trust. And that kind of idea of, "I've got this president." And especially to say that in front of the mistress. When mistresses- there's a song that gets sung, "Jeff Davis rides the white horse and Lincoln rides the mule." And slaves, they sing it the opposite way when they get together, "No, Lincoln rides the white horse, Jeff Davis rides the mule."

ABIGAIL COOPER:
And then of course, when mistresses overhear that, they get beat. And it's all of a sudden that only makes it clear that this- this fear, this coupling of Lincoln and freedom is something we need to keep using. It's the word that needs to be passed in kind of the grapevine network. It's also that Black Republican, Lincoln as a Black Republican and that Kentucky mistress, who even before Lincoln took office, said they generally think he's a Black man. This idea that they think Lincoln might be Black, they believe John Brown was Black. This idea that they have one of their own in office, they might have a connection to this nation is enough to give them some confidence that they can work out a deal.

ABIGAIL COOPER:
Lincoln is a symbol of God's deliverance. And I say this because, you know, what happens after the war, especially as the union's trying to put itself back together, Lincoln gets used a lot to kind of tell slaves, "Hey, look what we did for you." And so there's- so Lincoln is a messianic figure or Lincoln can be a figure of deliverance but Lincoln never lives up to it. Lincoln never lives up to the symbol that slaves want him to be as a symbol of deliverance, a symbol of revolution. But I will say, too, that they see Lincoln not as a God, but as a messenger of God. They will use him not as he is a deified figure himself, but he was the conduit, he was a Moses, he was a connection point to remind them that their prayers have

been answered. And that's a kind of an important distinction because a lot of owners yesterday say they couldn't have done it without a white man. They couldn't have done it without the kind of white savior. But they're not thinking of him that in that way, they're thinking of him as that connection point and that legibility point to the nation.

The Emancipation Proclamation

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ABIGAIL COOPER:
The Emancipation Proclamation, on military necessity, says that the Union is going to use Black men. I mean, it basically authorizes the use of Black men because it's a military necessity. It frees Black people in the Confederacy, not even in some of the “contraband” camps, but it will free people and people understand it. Even the word of the Emancipation Proclamation is enough to recognize that, "Okay, freedom is now underway and is going to be sanctified by the government." And that’s- it's important, it is a turning point, because of the way Black people tell about it. They tell the story, they say, "Now's the time to go into lines." And their numbers come in quickly, more quickly into refugee camps after the Emancipation Proclamation. But it's also a vexed document because it is on military necessity. And so it's this conditional emancipation. Is this emancipation helping our military necessity? And if it's not, a lot of times they say, "I don't know, we're not going to accept all these families. We're not going to give rations," or, "We're not going to deputize all of these Black midwives to be medical workers because we can't tell if this is really from medical necessity or – Are all these Black people helpful?" It has to be put into a frame of military necessity.

ABIGAIL COOPER:

And it's almost as though that practicality that Lincoln's famed for becomes the kind of, everyone has to turn into a lawyer. Is this for military necessity? And that kind of bean counting becomes so counterproductive, because Black people are already like, "We're here. We're building buildings, we're making gardens, and we can win you the war, just let us do our thing." And I think that's also where you have a lot of negotiation for Black men who realize that they are being paid more because you're moving from a macro focal system of that was slavery, a lot of women as engineers of the family to a patriarchal American system. And so men are making a lot more money and they realize they can leverage that. There's private firms will pay them a lot and then the army wants to pay them. And there's an understanding that this could be a stepping stone to citizenship. You can get a $300 bounty for signing up. But if that means that that three-year contract is going to take them away from their families, they aren't quite sure that that's what they want. And so the Emancipation Proclamation ends up being really a trigger of ambivalence. One man says, "I believe I'll be the best soldier when I get my ax," because he wants to build a homestead. He doesn't see the gun as the way to get his citizenship. He sees the land and he knows his land claim is going to be a lot more tenuous if he just leaves the women and children there to guard it.

Post-Emancipation Proclamation

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ABIGAIL COOPER:
Black troops become responsible for four million enslaved people's future with the nation and they have to perform excellent soldiery. And they do. I mean, even with a lot of hostility among white officers, even with some different battalions firing on the Black soldiers instead of the white Confederates, you

still have people toughing it out and performing martial manhood as they've been told to do. There's a huge recruitment effort and they say, "Will you join the army and be great Christian citizens?" And they really use it in a kind of recruitment revival, and they use the revivalistic language. And Black men say, "Okay."

ABIGAIL COOPER:
They want rations for their wives and children and when that is promised, they go off and they prove themselves in – You have, in South Carolina, you have them proving themselves throughout Fort Henry and Fort Donaldson, you have them at Milliken's Bend. You have Black men in Louisiana completely making a convert out of Butler. And I think what you're seeing from a lot of white soldiers is people are starting to see that their military prowess, their ability to serve as good soldiers. I mean, Lincoln had once said, "I really fear arming Black people because they're going to- those arms are just going to end up in their master's hands." And he really bought into that docility. Well, no, there was a reason why it was forbidden to arm Black men in the south, because it was a fear of insurrection. And here was an opportunity for a lot of Black men to wield the gun and do it for the Union.

ABIGAIL COOPER:
And Frederick Douglass becomes a huge proponent of recruitment efforts, Black chaplains, Black A.M.E. ministers are going down to the south kind of on a tour to kind of promote this, and Black soldiers do it. I mean, and you have a lot of Black soldiers even having to withstand all kinds of racism in the army. A Black man with dreadlocks who he holds, he said, "I hold these for religious reasons," and they forcibly shave his head. And he- there's all kinds of really terrible things that Black men go through in the army and yet they're still aware of how this might be the only way that the Union succeeds. And then the North who is

afraid of a long war that nobody expected this war to be so long. And the North changes its opinion. And Black soldiers are the reason the North goes from very tepid, possibly sort of kind of anti-slavery to, "Yes, abolition now," which is really a huge sea change.

ABIGAIL COOPER:
Even people who were pro-colonization switched because once you have Black men giving their lives for their country, turning into veterans, then giving that, they have to have some kind of stake. And the United States has to thank them somehow for that service. They are going to be the tipping point. And people knew that 1862 was a year of Confederate wins. The Confederacy was doing way better than anyone expected, against all odds, with far fewer resources. And people were really afraid. And so without Black soldiers, the Union might not have won and you had to give something in return.

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ABIGAIL COOPER:
And this is where Lincoln starts writing publicly, you know, to the naysayers. That service given, they are willing to die for you. What are we willing to do for them? And it's why you even have him coming around. And even as he's scheming like, "Can we get even partial colonization?" He's still trying to get Black people out of their country. But even as he's scheming that on the back end, he still comes out publicly and says, "Okay, maybe even the possible franchise for Black soldiers, for those few Black educated men." And that, in and of itself, that's huge, that's huge for Lincoln. And it really, if you see him as that kind of middle of the road reformist figure, you can see that he's really taking the temperature of other people who are like him.

The 13th Amendment

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ABIGAIL COOPER:
I believe that the 13th amendment is very much in line with Lincoln's desire to see slavery go. He wants to see slavery end, and that's what the 13th Amendment does. The 13th Amendment along with- the 13th amendment, the 14th, and the 15th amendment, those are Reconstruction Amendments, they've become the blueprint for Colorblind Law, which is a civil rights boon but it is a difficulty if you are looking at it from the perspective of reckoning with slavery. Because Black people in America don't ever get justice. And Lincoln is really an architect of that, he's envisioning that. He doesn't see the Homestead Act that's also passed in 1862 as this is something that Black people should participate in. He just wants slavery to die. He doesn't have a plan for what's going to happen to the Black people who had endured enslavement.

Who freed the slaves?

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ABIGAIL COOPER:
I feel very passionate about this question because it has been asked again and again. The moment that enslaved people were confronted with the possibility of freedom, people didn't want to see all the different ways that they were imagining it for themselves, because then that meant that they had to see all the visions they had for their freedom. And so it was already positioned as Lincoln freed you. Lincoln freed you. That is the line you should say when you need to come in contact with a white person who wants to own you. And so they say, "Oh, Lincoln freed me." They even invoke him, “master Lincoln.”

ABIGAIL COOPER:

It's almost like something they have to do in order to kind of get passage, it becomes the new pass. And so when you get to 1930s and these kind of mass interviews with formerly enslaved people, they are asking the question, "Who freed the slaves?" And the answer is A, it was Abraham Lincoln, or B, it was your masters. There's not even a choice, like you freed yourselves. And so what Black people say when they feel themselves stuck, they say, "Okay, I believe God freed me." You know, one woman says, "I believe Abraham Lincoln gets too much credit and I believe God freed me." And that happens again, and again, God freed us.

ABIGAIL COOPER:
Lincoln was a messenger of God. And some people say, you know, Jacob Thomas says, "I always thought Lincoln was a really smart guy, because he had to think so much of Black people to think they could live on nothing after the war." And they are so aware that Lincoln died and yes, there was – He died on Good Friday, what a Christ-like martyrdom. And they definitely, I mean, there's pictures of Lincoln on Black people's mantle's and they have Black crepe, mourning Lincoln. But it's also very much a performance that they have to give to be able to be legible to the U.S. state so that people don't fear a kind of race war, or insurrection that's always percolating. And so now, that, you know, you have in the later years, historians feeling a lot of self-congratulation, because they shifted it from- away from, "Who freed the slaves, Lincoln or the masters?" To, "Who freed the slaves, Lincoln or the slaves?" And the only answer that can really be there is, of course, enslaved people freed themselves. They knew they were legitimately free from birth, they were just looking for an opportunity to claim it. And that's what happened, this is what happened when Butler said, "Yes, here's a way you can legally make this legible." They're like, "Great, I'm going to perform what I've always known to be true, what I've always carved out

for myself in the Hush Harbor. I'm going to now try to bring into this nation." And it's been a tenuous relationship. But there's no way you can look at all the records I look at and not say, "Absolutely, Black people- Black people freed themselves."

END TC: 00:58:26:00

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