

# KUNHARDT **FILM** / FOUNDATION

MATTHEW KARP  
*LINCOLN'S DILEMMA*  
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**Matthew Karp Interview**  
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**Interviewed by Jackie Olive & Barak Goodman**  
**Total Running Time: 01:14:44**

START TC: 00:00:00:00

SPEAKER 1:

Matthew Karp interview, take one. [crosstalk 00:00:33]

MATTHEW KARP:

Yeah. Well, I teach at Princeton, but I live in Brooklyn, so it was pretty easy to come over here.

## **Slavery in the Mid-19th Century**

00:00:13:00

MATTHEW KARP:

The thing to remember about slavery, basically, in not just the United States, but across the Western hemisphere is that by so many measures, it really was at its peak in the middle decades of the 19th century. There were more enslaved people, more enslaved profits wrung from their toil, and it was essentially larger, and in some ways more economically dynamic than it had ever been before. There were waves of emancipation around the era of the American Revolution or the Haitian Revolution that had set hundreds of thousands of enslaved people free. And then Britain abolished its slaves in 1833, just to do the international context for a minute.

MATTHEW KARP:

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So in some sense, there was an abolitionist movement that was gaining some steam. But by the same token, slavery itself was also gaining steam, was expanding into what was known as the Old Southwest from the Atlantic seaboard colonies that had spread across hundreds, thousands of acres, new plantations were spreading into the cotton belt of Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana. And in the United States, the population of enslaved people was rising, the profits of the Cotton Kingdom were greater than ever. And in some ways the Southern commitment to the maintenance of slavery and the centrality of slavery to the Southern economy and Southern society was stronger than ever.

MATTHEW KARP:

And Southern statesmen began to conceive of a world, by the antebellum period, in which there would be tens, maybe even a hundred million enslaved people into the 20th century. In some ways the future of slavery was never brighter from their perspective at this moment, given the trajectory of slavery in the United States in the 19th century.

## **Westward expansion and slavery**

00:02:13:00

MATTHEW KARP:

Slavery, in part due to abolitionist activity and due to the resistance of enslaved people themselves had always been an issue in American life since the colonial period. Certainly it exploded in the revolutionary period when Northern states generally passed laws of gradual emancipation, but the other thing to remember about this antebellum period heading into the age of expansion, is that slavery had been basically moved aside in national politics. The two major parties, the two party system, called the second party system, that developed in the 1820s and 1830s between Whigs and Democrats – both

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parties were national, they had constituents, Northern and Southern, and they had a kind of tacit, sometimes explicit agreement to remove slavery from national politics, from the national conversation about America's future, and in effect to eliminate the radical demands of abolitionism from entering essentially electoral politics.

MATTHEW KARP:

So in all these debates about American expansion in the 1820s and 1830s, new states were added, like Arkansas. There was of course the Missouri ... I mean, maybe we don't need to go too deep into the Missouri crisis of 1820. But in the aftermath of the Missouri crisis is when the second party system developed to ensure that this contentious and explosive question of slavery would never again threaten to unseat and overturn the political establishment.

MATTHEW KARP:

And so part of this meant that slave holding leaders, to sort of come slowly to your question about expansion in the 1840s, is that slave holding leaders maintained what I would call a vise-like grip on the apparatus of the federal government. Slaveholding presidents predominated between the revolution and 1850, and through this two party system and especially through the Democratic party, slaveholders predominated in Congress, especially in the Senate and the cabinet, and presided over most of the levers of American foreign policy.

MATTHEW KARP:

So the annexation of Texas, which is the event that triggers the Mexican-American War, was conducted by the Tyler administration, President John Tyler from Virginia, a devoted and zealous advocate of slavery, whose Secretary of State, Abel Upshur, another Virginian pro-slavery writer, and then John C. Calhoun, maybe the most famous and influential pro-slavery

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thinker of all, had pursued Texas as a way both to strengthen the fledgling institution of slavery in Texas and keep it safe from British abolition, and also to expand the slave holding power of United States.

MATTHEW KARP:

And this leads, in effect, directly into the war with Mexico. And that war, again, conducted by a slave holding president, James K. Polk. I don't think it's fair to say was explicitly intended for the spread and propagation of slavery. That was certainly part of the motivation for Southerners. There were other nationalistic motives of general territorial expansion that Northerners were keen to pursue as well. But in the aftermath of that war, a new round of arguments about the future of slavery and the expansion of slavery emerges as Northerners begin to question, "Well, what is the status of slavery in these vast territories conquered from Mexico?"

## **Politics and public opinion on slavery**

00:05:45:00

MATTHEW KARP:

I would actually say that these Northern states had largely – well exclusively, by the 1820s, even New York and the slower ... With the small exception of New Jersey, which retained ... There were still enslaved people in New Jersey up until the Civil War, only a handful. But they had all passed statutes of abolition. My feeling, actually, on this is that, and I think this was born out by the course of anti-slavery politics in the 1850s, is that there was something like a slumbering anti-slavery majority in the North, that popular opinion in the North was not actively pro-slavery. What was pro-slavery were the institutions. The political institutions, that is the national political parties, the Whig and Democratic parties.

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And, in some ways, the institutional leaders of the American economy. For instance, the bankers and merchants of New York City carried on an extensive relationship with the cotton economy in the South and the development of all sorts of financial institutions in the antebellum Republic, from the insurance industry to all sorts of cotton brokerage in New York, was explicitly tied in with the future of slavery.

MATTHEW KARP:

So in some ways, I think, part of the reason why these antebellum parties, why the Whigs and the Democrats wanted to keep the question of slavery outside of politics is that they feared that actually anti-slavery might be a popular cause in the North, if it could ever break through. So there was a concerted effort within both parties to portray the abolitionists as radical zealots, irresponsible dis-unionists, and fanatics, who represented a danger to the Union. And great leaders of the party, the Whig party even, which was probably the less vociferously pro-slavery party, but men like Henry Clay and Daniel Webster, the great Whig leaders, constantly denigrated abolitionists, and really worked hard to marginalize them in political life. And they were successful.

MATTHEW KARP:

So to some extent, I think you could say that, to the extent that there was a broad anti-slavery opinion in the North in the 1830s and 40s, it was very thin and it was not activated. And it was, in some ways, complacent or maybe indifferent to this question. It fell to the anti-slavery movement, very slowly, by hook and by crook, to activate that potential majority and find the strand of anti-slavery politics that could not just agitate the radicals, but in effect, move from activism to mass politics. And this was the struggle of anti-slavery leaders across who started to enter mainstream politics in the 1840s and were really working across this antebellum period to make anti-slavery go mainstream. Their bet was that it could win a mainstream audience if they

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found the right formula and if they could connect the moral critique of slavery as a crime and as a sin to the ordinary interests of everyday Northerners.

## **The Kansas-Nebraska Act and Lincoln's re-entry into politics**

00:09:09:00

MATTHEW KARP:

Lincoln later said that he always possessed a deep sense of slavery's injustice since he'd traveled down the Mississippi and seen a slave auction in Louisiana. And that may well be true. I think most historians agree that is true. When he was in Congress in the 1840s, he did propose an abolition bill for Washington DC. But it's true also that as a Whig and as a loyal party man, Lincoln's political hero was Henry Clay, who had no truck with the abolitionists, who, for all of Henry Clay's status as the great compromiser, the one group he never compromised with were the abolitionists. He only compromised with the pro-slavery South, and he himself of course, was a slaveholder.

MATTHEW KARP:

So Lincoln, as a Whig, there was no chance for Lincoln the anti-slavery politician to emerge. It's only after the, in effect, the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854, which is a bill that Stephen Douglas, Lincoln's great antagonist in Illinois, pursued to bring Kansas, bring in Nebraska territory, the modern day states of Kansas and Nebraska, as a new state, without any restrictions on slavery, abrogating the Missouri Compromise. And this is a deal that Douglas had struck with important Southern senators in order to get a railroad built to Chicago.

MATTHEW KARP:

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It's a lot of contingent events, actually, that come into the making of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which abrogates the Missouri Compromise explicitly and basically opens the possibility of slavery expanding all across the great West, opens the possibility of slavery's future.

MATTHEW KARP:

We talk about the expansion of slavery. I actually prefer the question of, to frame it as the future of slavery, because that's really what's at stake in these debates, is not simply, will slavery exist in this sparsely populated province once indigenous people are conquered in the Great Plains. The question is really, what is the status and trajectory of slavery in the Republic writ large.

It's not the case that the anti-slavery movement that emerges in the early 1850s is concerned primarily with the immediate expansion of slavery. Far from it. They want the non extension of slavery into Kansas. And yet what they're really talking about is the future of slavery writ large in the American Republic.

MATTHEW KARP:

And the formula, this is where the kind of evolution that I was talking about earlier, the evolution of anti-slavery politics from, in some sense, radical activism of the William Lloyd Garrison stripe in Boston, *The Liberator*, which kept its distance from electoral politics. The way that anti-slavery politics had evolved in the 1830s, 1840s and 1850s had brought it closer to electoral politics.

MATTHEW KARP:

So, these anti-slavery parties had developed a concept that I think was really important. The idea of the Slave Power. The idea that slave holders, as early anti-slavery advocates pointed out, represented literally about 1% of the antebellum population. And William Seward actually says, "Not one

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hundredth part of the population are slave holders." They're genuinely an antebellum 1%.

MATTHEW KARP:

So why does this slave holding class, this privileged class, control so much of the American government? Somehow this 1% dominated the US Senate, dominated the Supreme Court, dominated the presidency, dominated all national politics, and made all sorts of decisions for the future of the Republic. And when anti-slavery advocates are basically able to connect this critique of the Slave Power and the undemocratic power of slave holders, it registers much more powerfully with ordinary Northern voters.

00:12:58:00

MATTHEW KARP:

At the same time that the Slave Power has abrogated, according to anti-slavery folk, the Missouri Compromise, has abrogated the traditional constant interpretation of the Constitution, which allows the possibility for states and territories to outlaw slavery, and is insistent on spreading slavery everywhere. So there's a series of slippery slope arguments that they make, all stemming from the idea of the Slave Power.

MATTHEW KARP:

And where Lincoln comes in, in some ways, is to ... Lincoln does not originate this movement. And Lincoln does not, for some time, lead this movement. But Lincoln's historic role is to serve as the most eloquent exponent of this movement in essentially moral and constitutional terms across the 1850s. So in 1854, first at Springfield, then at Peoria, and then across the decade, he makes a series of really powerful speeches connecting the abrogation of the Missouri Compromise and the Kansas-Nebraska Act to this slave holding effort to overhaul the Constitution, invalidate the Declaration of

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Independence, and rewrite the laws of the American Republic, against what he calls his ancient faith that all men are created equal in the Declaration of Independence.

MATTHEW KARP:

And this is a transformative moment. It's in this 1854 moment that the second party system, these Whigs and Democrats, whose tacit compact had kept slavery out of politics for decades, is blown up because northern outrage at the Missouri Compromise is palpable and significant. And because these anti-slavery advocates, often in third parties, sometimes they had been in the Whig party or the Democratic party, came together in this moment to insist on, in effect, the overthrow of this two-party system that had sustained the Slave Power for so long.

MATTHEW KARP:

And Lincoln is not the most enthusiastic advocate of this new partisan arrangement. He sticks with the Whigs for a whole year, even maybe two years. Others, Salmon Chase or Charles Sumner, are much more active in promoting – or in Illinois, Owen Lovejoy – in promoting the Republican party as a foundationally anti-slavery party. Lincoln still hopes to work with the Whigs.

MATTHEW KARP:

But by 1856, he sees this is no longer possible, and it's only the Republican party that can, in effect, save the Constitution and save the Declaration of Independence. And it's a radical transformation of American politics. It's, in effect, a political revolution before the letter. Because even before the Republicans win a national election, they have transformed the ground of American politics, such that the major arguments are no longer about, in effect, ethno-cultural issues or about banking or tariffs, but fundamentally

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about the future of slavery in this country, which is, itself, a really radical transformation.

## **Lincoln's 1850s antislavery views**

00:16:03:00

MATTHEW KARP:

Lincoln's argument: He says, quite simply, no man is good enough to govern another man without that man's consent. From the beginning, as soon as he emerges in 1854 in his new dress as an anti-slavery politician, he's focused on the injustice of slavery itself, the monstrous injustice of slavery itself.

That's the foundation point of all his anti-slavery politics. The idea he says, again, "Well, if the Negro is a man, my ancient faith teaches me that all men are created equal." And it's this vision of an anti-slavery Constitution, which does not recognize property in men, and whose centerpiece is the Declaration of Independence, which recognizes the equality of all men, that drives Lincoln's politics.

MATTHEW KARP:

Now, constitutionally, that formula gets a little more complicated, and I don't know if we want to get into that. But Lincoln does not, even after coming out very directly and denouncing the injustice, the monstrous injustice of slavery itself, he does then not say, "Okay, so Congress should simply abolish slavery, or slavery is actually illegal according to the Constitution," as some more radical abolitionists, like Frederick Douglass, argue.

MATTHEW KARP:

But what he does say, and this is the needle that the Republican party threads very successfully is that the Constitution does not allow Congress to immediately abolish slavery because that's left to the states. But what

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Congress can do is refuse the extension of slavery into the West, refuse to admit new slave states, remove the Slave Power, the slave holding class, remove its grip from state power, overthrow it, as Republicans were always saying, in fundamentally a democratic revolution. And deprived of its hold over the US government, Lincoln and other Republicans argued slavery will be put in course of ultimate extinction.

MATTHEW KARP:

So surrounded by antislavery states and deprived of this federal patronage and security, anti-slavery parties, Lincoln believed, would emerge within the South, and slavery, yes, would slowly, but in his view, certainly, face ultimate extinction. So that's the Republican plan, in effect, to undermine and ultimately destroy slavery in the 1850s.

## **Lincoln is a moderate in a radical party**

00:18:36:00

MATTHEW KARP:

I think this comes from Lincoln, and Lincoln was not alone among Republicans or among anti-slavery politicians in this sense. Torn between the ultimate goal of anti-slavery politics and the need to build a majority to achieve that goal. I mean, I think that's the foundational, in effect, strategic principle of the anti-slavery movement in the 1850s, it centers on this need to build a majority.

MATTHEW KARP:

And the need to build a majority means finding that thread that can prescribe an anti-slavery solution that's constitutional, since the Constitution is something that is central to antebellum politics, and it's not just something that judges and lawyers argue about. It's something that the people argue

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about all the time. So putting anti-slavery in constitutional terms is really important. And in effect, finding an anti-slavery solution that can mobilize the vast majority of white Northerners is fundamental. Otherwise, anti-slavery may remain as radical as you please, but it will be irrelevant. And the goal is to move from radical activism to mass politics. And in fairness to the Republicans, even as critics like Frederick Douglass and other Black abolitionists lambasted Lincoln, and all the Republicans, for these kinds of compromises to Northern public opinion, at the same time, they often in some ways grudgingly, but powerfully, recognize the force of this kind of mass public opinion turn against slavery.

MATTHEW KARP:

Even if the Republican program did not provide for the destruction of slavery in the way that Douglass would like to see it, Republican politics had transformed Northern opinion and made it much more conscious of the monstrous injustice of slavery itself, had made the future of slavery much less secure.

MATTHEW KARP:

As Douglass said, when Lincoln was elected, "The power of slavery is broken and slave holders know it." No amount of disclaimers and reassurances that Lincoln could make, would ever convince slave holders, because they knew that Lincoln had been elected by a Northern public opinion that had been roused in wrath against the idea of the Slave Power and against the propagation of slavery itself.

MATTHEW KARP:

I guess I would say some historians insist on Lincoln as a compromising figure and as a moderate, but I think that really gets the story wrong in the sense that, if you look at the Republican movement as a whole and what it did to upend decades of, in effect, pro-slavery politics in America, Lincoln was a

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moderate within the Republicans, but he was a moderate within a radical party that already had transformed the landscape of American politics and portended the destruction of slavery, well before the Civil War even began. As many Black abolitionists also recognized.

MATTHEW KARP:

There's a woman, Mary Ann Shadd Cary, one of my favorite quotes from this period in the mid 1850s, even before Lincoln's elected. Mary Ann Shadd Cary was a free Black woman from Pennsylvania, who moved to Canada and edited a newspaper for Black emigres to Canada. She was by no means an apologist for moderate politics. But what she says, "Instead of a handful of abolitionists from motives of humanity, we see millions of abolitionists from motives of necessity."

MATTHEW KARP:

That formulation, the switch, the transformation of anti-slavery from in effect, a humanitarian movement of thousands, into a mass political movement of millions, is the radical transformation that the Republican Party achieves in the 1850s and that Lincoln symbolizes.

## **The South's reaction to Lincoln's election in 1860**

01:22:06:16

Matthew Karp:

They immediately act... Again, it's not just Lincoln, it's this whole movement. It's this mass movement in the North. If you read the Declarations of Secession, put out by South Carolina and Georgia, Mississippi, elsewhere, they're insistent on it's not simply that Lincoln himself, this anti-slavery figure is at the helm of state power and will act to undermine slavery, it's that, as I think Georgia says, the whole popular mind of the North has been turned against slavery through this kind of anti-slavery mass politics, and that the future of slavery in such a union, whatever the formal platform of the Republican Party may be, is fundamentally insecure.

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These Republicans represent a really radical and transformative force, a sectional party, a disunionist party, a fanatical party. It's not just Southerners who see this. I wanted to read something from Stephen Douglas, which is great.

It's Northern Democrats who recognize how radical, the radical force that Lincoln represents. In one of the Lincoln-Douglas debates, Douglas characterizes Lincoln this way, "Mr. Lincoln is a kindhearted, amiable, good natured gentleman, with whom no man has a right to pick a quarrel, even if he wanted one. I have known him for 25 years and there is no better citizen, no kinder hearted man. He is a fine lawyer, possesses high ability, and there is no objection to him except the monstrous revolutionary doctrines with which he is identified."

I love that line from Douglas because it represents Lincoln's essential decency and ordinary status, but somehow he's become connected to this monstrous radicalism that proclaims slavery an injustice and threatens the social fabric that has united this country, according to the Democratic Party, according to Southern slaveholders, according to in effect the whole political establishment. Somehow this has now come under threat from these revolutionary doctrines of the Republican Party.

South Carolina hits the ground running as early as basically October of 1860. Presidential elections in antebellum America, state elections, the calendar of elections was strange and state elections happened before the actual presidential election. As early as October, 1860, when the results from Indiana, Illinois, and Pennsylvania, the swing states of that moment, come through, the nation knows Lincoln is going to be elected. As early as October, even before election day itself, South Carolina is putting the wheels in motion for secession. They send a guy bearing the flamboyant name of States Rights Gist – that was literally his first name, States Rights – to travel around the south and try to convince the other Southern leaderships to act as one and secede as soon as, even before, Lincoln takes office, and the wheels, South Carolina itself leaves the union in late 1860, the wheels are already in motion.

The other lower Southern states are a bit more cautious. They wait to see what happens in the Senate and in Congress, where there are a series of last ditch negotiations happening between in effect the lower South and the Republican Party about the future of slavery. Will, in the face of this threat of secession from South Carolina and elsewhere, will the Republicans actually make a compromise about the future of slavery and the extension of slavery?

The election of 1860, like the election of 1856, saw an almost unprecedented intensity in popular enthusiasm in both North and South alike. It's important to remember that these elections in the late 1850s, when slavery entered the mainstream politics, turnout spiked about 80% of eligible voters. Of course, this was mostly adult white men, although in New England adult Black men voted at very high rates as well. The popular enthusiasm and energy around these politics of slavery in North and South alike are incredibly intense. When Lincoln actually wins office, he wins on a wave of mass democratic enthusiasm. It's this spectacle that scares the South as much as what they know of Abraham Lincoln, the Illinois railroad lawyer, and former Whig himself. It's this concentrated force of the Republican Party as an expression of a powerful northern majority that scares the South.

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Of course, Lincoln doesn't win a national majority. He's not on the ballot in the Southern states. They forcibly suppress the Republican ticket everywhere except for a few counties in the border states. It is safe to say that although Lincoln didn't win a majority, he won a majority everywhere he was on the ballot. He won a majority in the North, and he won a majority in the places where people were allowed to vote for him. This scares the hell out of the South. Because this represents not just the elevation of a particular politician who has denounced slavery and called for its ultimate extinction, it represents the elevation of a political party, an organized force that represents the will of the northern majority that is fundamentally hostile to slavery.

Even if it doesn't have a mandate for immediate action against slavery, it threatens the power of slavery. Southerners immediately start making preparations to secede.

## **The threat of antislavery politics to the South**

01:27:33:16

Matthew Karp:

Yeah, you see with the rise of the Republican Party in the mid fifties, and really with the election of 1856, you see Southern leaders, slave holding leaders have a new consciousness of the danger of anti-slavery politics in the North and the hundred different ways that he could threaten the security of slavery. You see, for instance, after that election, before John Brown even, before the Harper's Ferry raid, you see huge reports in the winter of 1856, after the election, of rumors of slave insurrections, rumors of movements of enslaved people, that are investigated and historians still argue about to what extent these slave insurrections were real or were Southerners scaring themselves. But there is evidence that enslaved people, as early as 1856, recognized something in the Republican Party as a potential threat to the system of slavery, especially the enslaved people in the border states.

There is this sense that even the mere presence of an anti-slavery party that is coursing through the North, that is bringing tens of thousands of people to these mass rallies, where orators denounced the injustice of slavery and declare that its ultimate extinction must arrive, that this threatens the security of slavery, both because the Republicans may one day win high office and undermine slavery with the levers of the state, but also because this popular enthusiasm against slavery might make enslaved people themselves more eager to take matters into their own hands.

When John Brown moves against slavery in West Virginia in 1859, he's kind of stepping into a cauldron of Southern fear about the possibility of anti-slavery politics writ large. The fact is John Brown's raid fails. Tactically, it's a nightmare. As Frederick Douglass said, "You're walking into a steel trap and you'll never get out alive." That's exactly what John Brown does. He fails even to rouse enslaved people in the area to his cause because it's so self-evidently hopeless. But John Brown was a great martyr and he knew how to play his hand after he was arrested. He knew how to play his hand facing the gallows. He inspires

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what Southerners are afraid of is, in some ways, even less John Brown, but the Northern reaction to John Brown, had they refused to condemn him.

Yes, Northern politicians like Lincoln and a few others issued a kind of stiff disclaimers. "I had nothing to do with John Brown. The Republican Party has nothing to do with John Brown. We recognize that he is a fanatic and we'll never go about attacking slavery this way." But even those disclaimers for many Republicans, like Salmon Chase and others, who say, "In the end, it's not John Brown that attacked slavery, it's slavery itself that made John Brown." A large number of radical Republicans and Northern intellectuals like Ralph Waldo Emerson who had not been a radical up until the 1850s on slavery said, "John Brown has made the gallows as glorious as the cross," and celebrate the heroism of this doomed raid.

Southerners say – this is where this sense of Northern public opinion comes in – "How can we exist in a Republic with these people who think this murderer, this fanatic, this terrorist is a revolutionary hero?" Even semi ordinary Republican politicians play into this, by in effect refusing to denounce Brown as vociferously as the Southerners demand. So it's not even Brown's raid, but it's the Northern reaction to it that I think is most significant.

## **What Lincoln was facing as he assumed the presidency**

01:31:07:21

Matthew Karp:

After Lincoln is elected and the lower South begins making preparations to secede, the real question that's facing the country is, will there be a last-ditch compromise? Will there be some kind of arrangement that will solve once and for all this question of slavery's extension, or, as I said, slavery's future?

In some sections of the North, there is actually considerable enthusiasm for some kind of compromise. Nobody wants to see a civil war, even many abolitionists aren't excited about a civil war. That portends bloodshed and disaster and a lot of pain for the country. The real question is, as Southerners and Republicans in Washington begin to hash out the possibility of a deal, the question is, how will Lincoln react? How will Lincoln and his party respond to this threat of secession? Will they cut a deal?

In effect, what happens is they refuse to cut that deal. Southerners, including Jefferson Davis, up through December of 1860, pronounce their willingness to support what's called the Crittenden Compromise, which would have in effect written the Missouri Compromise line across the North American continent and said, "No slavery above, slavery below." They say, "If the Republicans accept this deal, we'll accept this deal." And Lincoln says, "No deal."

This is where, unlike his great hero and mentor Henry Clay, the great compromiser, Lincoln is really the great uncompromiser. He says, the whole reason for the Republican Party's existence is the opposition to the extension of slavery, the refusal to grant that as the American Republic expands, slavery expands with it, and the insistence that slavery has to be put on that road to ultimate extinction. He refuses even in the face of secession and potentially civil war, he refuses to make a compromise. This leads to the secession of the

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entire lower South and the establishment of the Confederacy, all before Lincoln even takes office.

I think in refusing the compromise of the Southern slave holders to avert disunion, I don't think that meant that Lincoln could see the future and understood that this meant four years of bloody civil war and immediate emancipation by 1865. I think he still hoped, as the majority of Republicans did, that the South was bluffing, and that faced with finally at long last a Northern refusal to compromise, a refusal to truckle at the feet of the South and at the feet of slavery, the South would come to its senses, realize that it was the minority faction in the Union, realize that slavery no longer had the power to command the federal government, and retreat and back down from the demand for disunion.

I genuinely think that Lincoln and most Republicans, like Secretary of State Seward and others, really believed that war would not come. As Lincoln later said in his second inaugural, one side would make war rather than let the nation survive and the other side would accept it rather than let the nation perish. I think that's Lincoln's mode. He doesn't know exactly where he's going, and this is where actually Lincoln does overlap with the radical abolitionists like Frederick Douglass and others, who also would accept war rather than accept either disunion or another rotten compromise with slavery.

Even if Lincoln doesn't see the future in the same way that Frederick Douglass might've seen the future, he understood that confronted with those choices, he would rather accept war than choose compromise with slavery or acceptance of disunion.

## **The gradual acceleration towards the goal of emancipation**

01:34:51:13

Matthew Karp:

Let me dissent a little bit from the conventional view here. I think there's one reading of the story of the Civil War and emancipation and the story of Lincoln's path towards emancipation that says, "In the beginning, we went from a war to save the Union to a war to free the slaves, and slavery was pretty far down on the priority list when the war began, and then due to unforeseen circumstances, brought about by the tumult and chaos of the war, Lincoln was forced into accepting emancipation as the actual aim of the war. I think that's a little too neat, because the truth is the war had only been caused by Republican anti-slavery in the first place and by Lincoln and the Republican Party's unwillingness to back down on the question of slavery's future.

The union that Lincoln was seeking to preserve, and the union that Lincoln was willing to accept war in order to preserve, was a union with slavery not part of its future. It was always an anti-slavery union that Lincoln was fighting to save. Otherwise, he would have compromised on slavery from the get-go. I think it's a little bit of a false distinction to counterpose slavery and the Union in this fundamental way. Now, how would slavery meet its end? That remained uncertain. Yes, the war absolutely accelerated the path towards anti-slavery, but this is something that Republicans themselves also understood and foresaw.

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Lincoln doesn't have any quotes exactly like this, but many members of his party warned, in the summer of 1860, if the South secedes slavery will go out in blood. That if the South leaves the Union and there is an attempt to break apart the American nation, there will be a civil war and slavery will meet its end violently.

The South has a choice, either as William Seward says, Lincoln's Secretary of State had said many times in the 1850s, "Either the South can agree to make arrangements to end slavery peacefully and constitutionally, or the South can accept war and see slavery go out violently."

Lots of Republican politicians understood that when the war began, as I think Carl Schurz, who was an important Republican from Missouri, sorry, who was an important Republican from Wisconsin, said in a speech in St. Louis, enslaved people will take matters into their own hands. The south cannot fight a war to preserve slavery while holding on to that institution on the ground. Schurz says, "Every slave cabin..." Sorry, I want to get this quote right, "Every plantation is an open wound. Every slave cabin a sore."

Enslaved people will run to Union lines, will undermine the social fabric of the South and this is already implicit in what the Civil War means. Even from the beginning, even from before the first shots are fired. Now, it is true that Lincoln and the Republicans and some of the moderates and conservatives, because of his need to hold onto Kentucky, his need to hold onto the border states, his need to appease conservatives and Democrats in the north and to sustain the war effort, Lincoln is very cautious about the pace and the character and the rhetoric associated with this war of emancipation.

My understanding of the history is, right from the beginning, this is conceived of as a possibility, and is in fact an inevitability, that right from the beginning, the weakening and ultimately the destruction of slavery is seen as concomitant with the Civil War. I would say that the war was fought to save the Union, but the war was fought to save an anti-slavery Union, and from the beginning there was an enormous disagreement within that anti-slavery Union about how radical and how rapid the progress toward anti-slavery would be. Frederick Douglass, radical abolitionists, and some radicals in Congress, Charles Sumner, Henry Wilson in Massachusetts, Thaddeus Stevens in Pennsylvania and others, urge Lincoln to pursue something like a war of emancipation nearly from the start. But the political calculus of the Civil War in the beginning is very fraught, because in order to sustain this victorious war against a formidably militarized South, Lincoln feels that he needs to retain the support of conservatives in the North and of, in particular, the border states, Kentucky, Missouri, and Maryland.

That mediates against an embrace of a rapid war of emancipation. In order to retain Kentucky, which is a slave holding state within the Union, Lincoln says, "We are not waging a remorseless revolutionary war," even though what's actually happening on the ground as early as 1861 in places like southeastern Virginia, is tens, hundreds of thousands of enslaved people are running to Union lines, are being proclaimed "contraband of war" by Union generals, and are in effect emancipated by the terms of the First Confiscation Act, which goes into effect in the middle of 1861.

In effect, emancipation is already happening on the ground at the edges, even if it's not rhetorically proclaimed by the Republican Party for political reasons. I think that's the

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dynamic that really characterizes the first year and a half of the war, is emancipation really starting to happen on the ground in quite large numbers by late 1861, as Union armies pour down the Mississippi River. In early 1862, when New Orleans Falls, all of the enslaved people who come under Union control are by and large, under the terms of the First and then the Second Confiscation Act, no longer enslaved. Their status is a bit uncertain and yes, Republican leaders and especially Republican conservatives refuse to rhetorically proclaim a war of emancipation, but that's already in effect what's happening.

Yes, radical abolitionists are very frustrated by this, and want Lincoln to own it and claim it and make it, write emancipation on, in effect, in heavy black ink, on the cover of every military proclamation. Lincoln refuses to do this because his own sense of the political tactics are different. By 1862, it's really clear that this is what's happening, and it's clear even in Lincoln's own mind that emancipation is becoming not just a military necessity, because in some ways it was always part of this military effort against the South, but an open embrace of emancipation and a kind of, in the form of a proclamation, or in the form of actual enticement of Southern slaves to cross enemy lines and join the Union army, is necessary. And in some ways, that's what changes, not the meaning of the war, but the pace and the acceleration of that move toward anti-slavery.

## **What drove the change towards emancipation during the Civil War**

01:41:40:17

Matthew Karp:

I think there are sort of two myths at work here. There is the myth of the Great Emancipator, where Lincoln loftily from his perch in Washington, with the stroke of a pen, nobly sets free 4,000,000 enslaved people. And you can see that in some of the sculptures that were created right after the war, where Lincoln is sort of standing and bestowing freedom to this passive slave. And that's a mythology, because clearly events on the ground, the combination of anti-slavery politics in the North and the actions of enslaved people, are constantly changing the circumstances and weakening slavery from the moment the war starts.

But, there is also the myth of the reluctant emancipator, who did everything, in this vision, Lincoln did everything he could to resist turning a war to save the Union into a war to free the slaves. When in fact, both of those ideas were bound inextricably in his head from the beginning. This was always a war to save an anti-slavery Union. The only question was how fast anti-slavery would come.

My view is, it's also a mistake to separate the actions of enslaved people from the political activities of the Republican Party and of antislavery activists in the North. The Republican Party understood from the beginning that enslaved people would take matters into their own hands in the event of civil war. And enslaved people understood from the beginning that the Republican Party portended a radical threat to the future of slavery. This was evident as early as 1856 with rumors of slave insurrection. Those rumors, again, re-emerged after Lincoln's election in 1860.

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And as soon as the war begins, enslaved people are aware, not just that in fact, this isn't a war to simply save the Union, the antebellum Union as it existed as a slave holding Union, but it's a war to save an anti-slavery Union. Enslaved people are running to Union lines because they understand that this war is aimed at slavery in some fundamental sense.

So I wouldn't oppose the kind of anti-slavery work of Republican politicians and the anti-slavery actions of enslaved people. I would say, they kind of functioned as a sort of accelerating cycle in which both sides sort of radicalized each other.

## **Northern white opinion on Black rights and slavery**

01:44:00:06

Matthew Karp:

It is important to mention Northern white racism somewhere. So like that exists. I just feel like we need to make sure that we get that on the table, that among the factors that Lincoln was, and Republicans were, contending with in trying to sort of thread the needle between an anti-slavery politics that could credibly threaten the future of slavery, and at the same time, win a Northern majority, is the overwhelming fact of white prejudice in the North, in which even though I think a broad, but, sort of slumbering majority of Northern white people did oppose slavery, and could be activated and in fact were activated by this Republican party movement to rise up against the Slave Power and to demand the overthrow of this privileged slaveholding class that was seizing the West, turning the West into a dreary despotism of masters and slaves, and was kind of going to extend the monstrous injustice of slavery across the continent – even if a Northern majority could be roused in opposition to slavery, which it, which I think the 1850s, and then ultimately the 1860s really showed was true, rousing a Northern majority on behalf of equal rights for African-Americans is another story.

And the Republican party had to even, even members of the Republican party who openly supported equal rights, like Charles Sumner in Massachusetts, understood that in order to build a majority, it was a complicated dance to deal with this overwhelming fact of Northern racism. So, whereas Northern Democrats constantly talked about race, Republicans tried to turn the subject back to slavery, because it was Stephen Douglas and the Democrats who said, "The Republicans stand, they're the Black Republicans, they stand for Negro equality, we stand for the white man's government." And the Republicans in response said, "No, you stand for the slaveholding class. You stand for the privileged class. You stand for slavery." So, but that creates a dynamic where the Republican party is willing to actually make some quite powerful proclamations against slavery without necessarily taking a strong position in favor of Black political rights or equal rights, more broadly, certainly in the North.

## **Lincoln's views on equality**

01:46:19:23

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Matthew Karp:

Lincoln's bedrock in the antebellum period and through the Civil War is the Declaration of Independence. So when he says, "My ancient faith teaches me that all men are created equal," he does believe in a certain bedrock equality between all, not just all men, but all people. He at one point uses an example of an enslaved woman. And he says, in a debate with Douglas, he says, "Her right to earn the fruit of her labor is the same as my right, is the same as anyone's right. No one has the right to govern another person under slavery without that person's consent."

There is a kind of bedrock equality against enslavement, but on the question of the broader political rights, voting rights, Lincoln is very cautious and uncertain and his own views are actually very ambiguous and even our best historians still argue about what his private convictions on these questions were. What is unambiguous is his understanding that the sort of broad Northern white majority, which he needed to oppose slavery, was not willing to support Black rights. Now, it is the case that that majority starts to move in the direction of Black rights across the Civil War period. The referenda that are attempted to put Black suffrage on the ballot in New York State and other places start to win more white support, but it's never a majority. And Lincoln has to contend with this in effect Northern majority, that is anti-slavery and anti-Black rights. So that's a very narrow tight rope for this Republican party to walk in order to sort of oppose slavery and yet withhold actual formal equality in the Republic.

## **Lincoln's actions: moral conviction or political circumstances?**

01:48:07:11

Matthew Karp:

I'd want to put Lincoln's caution in context. As I said, he was a cautious member of a revolutionary party. So I think his caution was in some ways, was borne out as politically valuable in the course of the Civil War. Yes, a proclamation of emancipation in 1861, would have been more morally admirable certainly, contemporary abolitionists thought so, and certainly citizens of the 21st century would think so. But Lincoln understood that what was necessary to actually free enslaved people was not admirable moral convictions, but a political force that could break the chains of slavery itself, which meant winning the war.

So I'm actually okay with a cautious revolutionary Lincoln. I don't think that that undermines his greatness in any sense, as long as we understand that he was not a cautious, not simply a cautious politician, but a cautious revolutionary politician who did preside over what was in fact, the greatest social revolution in American history, in the form of emancipation, the liquidation of \$3,000,000,000 of property, or rather the redistribution

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of that property to the enslaved people themselves who gained possession of it. And this is an unforeseeable act, even a few years before the Civil War, it happens with incredible rapidity, if we zoom out from a historical perspective. It happened in part, because, I think, Lincoln was a successfully cautious revolutionary in transforming the war from a war to save an anti-slavery Union to a war to save an emancipating Union, an emancipator's Union.

I don't think that the interpretation that I have given is at odds with the idea of Lincoln's growth. I think he does grow, I think his conviction against slavery, and his sense of the need to tread a political tight rope to effectively combat slavery, is consistent. But I think he begins to move faster along that tight rope as the war accelerates, and as enslaved people do begin to take matters into their own hands.

Everyone was radicalized by this war. Lincoln was radicalized by this war. Everyone was radicalized by this war. The war made the antebellum Republic look like a medieval relic. As I think George Templeton Strong said in 1865, "In five years, we have passed through a thousand years of human existence." And in that sense, if Lincoln was always anti-slavery, he never envisioned the end of slavery coming in such an immediate uncompensated and violent revolutionary way within just five years. And so absolutely his convictions weren't radicalized, but his sense of what was politically possible was radicalized by the war.

## **What accelerated Lincoln's move towards emancipation**

01:50:55:18

Matthew Karp:

Lincoln and Republicans began to accelerate the move to emancipation in part because slaves were emancipating themselves by crossing Union lines, by showing up en masse in Union military camps in southeastern Virginia, and then in the Mississippi Valley. Wherever the Union Army went, enslaved people also showed up, and they demanded to be dealt with. That required an acceleration of this emancipation policy, which Republicans themselves were prepared to do, because it was part of their understanding of what the Civil War would always bring. And so you do see the First Confiscation Act, the Second Confiscation Act and the Emancipation Proclamation happen.

The second thing that accelerates Lincoln's movement toward emancipation is the intensity of the war with the Confederacy itself, and the need to break down Confederate resistance. And clearly, by 1862, it's clear that this is going to be a long war, this is going to be a hard war, and this is a war that will not end in a matter of months. The need to break down Southern resistance means it requires a need to strike more directly, not just indirectly, but right at the heart of the support of the Southern war effort, which was of course slavery, the system that was the foundation of the entire Southern economy and Southern society. So the Emancipation Proclamation, I think, is not a radical change of policy, but an acceleration of this consistent effort to undermine the South by attacking slavery. But it's an effort to do it explicitly, and by actually consciously enticing enslaved people themselves to come to Union lines and enlisting those enslaved people in the army that would fight against their masters.

## **The 13th Amendment**

01:52:42:10

Matthew Karp:

After the Emancipation Proclamation, which, again, I see, as Frederick Douglass saw, as not a radical new step for the Republican Party, but an incomplete acceleration of this movement toward anti-slavery and toward emancipation. After the Emancipation Proclamation, the truth is the vast majority of enslaved people in the South were still enslaved, over the course of 1863 and 1864, hundreds of thousands of more enslaved people under the terms of proclamation won their freedom by crossing to Union lines or were liberated when Union soldiers showed up on their plantations. But the truth is over probably 2,5-3,000,000, maybe more, of the South's enslaved population remained in chains in the year 1864. So Lincoln understood, and the Republican party understood, that in some ways this war of emancipation, such as it was, was not enough to actually end slavery.

So Republicans begin to develop a more comprehensive, legal and political mechanism that would actually end slavery for good, without fear of reprisal or without fear of return. And this is the 13th Amendment, a constitutional amendment that is a bulletproof way to make sure that slavery is dead for good. And this does show the distance that Lincoln has traveled since the war began, where, by the election of 1864, the 13th Amendment, an open declaration that this is a war, not just to save an anti-slavery Union, but a war explicitly for emancipation, is stapled at the heart of the Republican platform. The Republicans run the election of 1864, not just on anti-slavery, but on emancipation itself, on a constitutional amendment for immediate emancipation across the South. And this is, if they were a radical party in the 1850s, they're a revolutionary party by the 1860s. And what's remarkable is they win an even greater majority in 1864 than they had won in 1860, running full-throatedly on an emancipation platform. Lincoln wins 55% of the Northern vote, and he does so on the basis of this platform.

## **Frederick Douglass' second meeting with Lincoln**

01:54:59:10

Matthew Karp:

So, in 1864 the Republicans have made emancipation central to their re-election campaign. The 13th Amendment is on the ballot, and ultimately they win the election. But in the period of the summer of 1864, with Grant stalled outside Richmond and Sherman stalled in Tennessee, the war is dragging on, Lincoln fears that he might not be able to win re-election. And he worries that if the Republicans lose, emancipation will lose too. The Democrats will come into office potentially. And the war's end will be negotiated with slavery itself still intact.

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So as a measure of how Lincoln grew, if you will, not in his conviction against slavery, which I think was consistent, nor in his conviction that a Northern majority needed to be mustered to oppose slavery, which I think was also consistent, but in his sense of the timeline, the radical acceleration of this war against slavery, a sense of how much he accelerated that timeline is clear in the summer of '64 when, facing defeat and facing enormous pressure in the North from Democrats to sort of abandon emancipation as a formal war aim, Lincoln, in fact, what does he do? He calls Frederick Douglass to the White House, and he proposes a very strange plan to Frederick Douglas personally.

Now, Douglass had spent much of the war since emancipation serving as a military recruiter for the Union Army, recruiting African-Americans to sign up and fight, as hundreds of thousands of them did. But now in August 1864, facing a potential defeat and the loss of emancipation at the polls, Lincoln proposes that Douglass lead an effort to sort of in effect, run 100 John Brown raids, sponsored by the federal government, across the South, to spread the news of emancipation deep behind Confederate lines, encourage enslaved people, not just enslaved people at the battlefield, but enslaved people far deep in Mississippi and Georgia and Alabama, to take matters into their own hands and escape the plantation and sap Southern morale from within, and also make sure that emancipation was real. Lincoln says to Douglass, "They're coming, but they're not coming fast enough. We need to accelerate emancipation. And so I'm going to put you in charge of a kind of, in effect, an anti-slavery guerrilla war effort, that would potentially serve as a sort of federal government's covert war on slavery in late 1864 if the Republicans lose."

Now, nothing ever comes to this, because days after that conversation Sherman takes Atlanta and the Republicans quickly regain the upper hand in the political conversation. And Lincoln wins re-election by a large and healthy margin. And there's no need, the 13th Amendment passes in the winter of '64-'65. So there's no need for this Frederick Douglass anti-slavery covert operation. But the fact that Lincoln is even proposing this...this is one of the rare instances where Frederick Douglass, it's not that Frederick Douglass demanded something and Lincoln finally moved in his direction. Lincoln actually comes up with this slightly cockamamie scheme all on his own. And Douglass says, "Okay, sure, I guess maybe I can do that." But he's a little bit baffled by Lincoln's sort of enthusiasm to, in effect, confirm that this will be a war of emancipation and whatever happens at the polls and on the battlefield, slavery will not return as it had been before the war.

## **States Rights Gist**

01:58:29:08

Matthew Karp:

So States Rights Gist is a relative, a younger relative of the governor of South Carolina in 1860. He had been born in the nullification crisis in the 1830s and had been named literally States Rights to signify South Carolina's commitment to its independence, its sovereign independence from national politics. Of course, he also stood very strongly for slavery because slavery and states' rights were inextricable. And in 1860 with Lincoln elected, he is dispatched by the government of South Carolina to go round to the other Southern States

and convince the political leadership of, especially the lower South, to act in concert with South Carolina in leaving the union.

So on one level, in his person, in his name and in his actions, he embodies the antebellum South, both in its, it's a bit ironic because he's hopping from state to state trying to convince these individual sovereign units to act and deploy their states' rights to leave the Union. But at the same time, what he's also doing, and this also reflects the reality of the antebellum South and the Confederacy, he's actually attempting to forge a very powerful Confederate central government in which these States will be subordinated under a powerful pro-slavery regime, which also is true to the antebellum Southern experience in which that regime was the United States government and states' rights leaders like John C. Calhoun happily served in the federal government and wielded federal power to defend slavery via the Fugitive Slave Act, via American foreign policy, via military and naval policy. And it's true to the Confederate experience when states' right Southerners forged an incredibly strong federal government devoted above all else to the preservation of slave property.

### **Slavery in the 1850s economy**

02:00:31:11

Matthew Karp:

Slavery in America was very old. It had been around for centuries. It had been in the Western hemisphere for centuries, but in some ways, in the 1850s, it actually was at its peak. There were more enslaved people. And there were more profits wrung from the toil of those people in the United States in 1860 than there had been at any point in American history prior. The cotton economy was more valuable and more profitable in the United States than it had been at any time in the history of the Western hemisphere, And the American economy – It's actually complicated and this is where I don't actually want to overstate the case – because on the one hand, the slave economy was booming as it had never been before. The sort of brutal dynamism of slavery was never more evident than in the profits of the cotton kingdom, and of in fact the vast number of goods that enslaved people helped produce from wheat in Virginia to sugar in Louisiana. And in some ways, the cotton economy and the economy of slavery was tightly bound with the American economy as a whole. Northern merchants and bankers in New York and Northern factories produced goods for slave plantations and profited from the sale of cotton abroad and across the North. Both in economic and in political relations, these worlds were tightly intertwined.

At the same time, it is true, and I don't know how much you guys want to emphasize this, but I think it is worth stating that in other ways, by the 1850s, the North, especially around the Great Lakes region had begun to develop an economy that was less dependent on slavery than it had been earlier in the 19th century. And that, in some ways, the basis of that internal economy in which timber from Michigan and wheat from Illinois and corn from Ohio was transmitted through the Great Lakes to the Erie Canal, that internal Northern economy in some ways provided a kind of economic basis for anti-slavery that did not exist 50 years before. So, in some ways, both what's true is that the US economy profited more than it ever had from slavery, but was also developing features that made portions of the

upper North less dependent on slavery than they had ever been. That's the paradox of the 1850s.

## **The experience of the enslaved**

02:02:57:22

Matthew Karp:

One of the best witnesses to the reality and the lived experience of slavery on the ground in its many different forms was Solomon Northrup, free African-American in New York who, famously in the movie "12 Years A Slave" as we know, but Solomon Northrup who was a free African-American New Yorker who was kidnapped and sent South and sold into slavery in Louisiana, where he recorded, in some ways he had a distinctive perspective on slavery in that he could see it both from the inside and from the outside. And what struck Northrup above all, in some ways, almost in some ways more powerfully, it's more powerful to read his testimony as a sort of undercover spy on slavery than someone who was born into slavery and never knew any other reality.

So Northrup, who knew what freedom was like in the North – and of course, freedom for African-Americans in the North was a pinched and second-class kind of freedom – but nevertheless, the contrast between that freedom and what he experienced under slavery was immense. And Northrup testified to the way in which enslaved women were, some of the characters in his story, were routinely brutalized by slave masters, were sexually victimized and were subject to... The nature of slavery is the nature of the domination under the will of any one person. So there may be an individually kind master, but that individually kind master still subjects you to their will. That individually kind master may at any moment decide to sell you to an individually brutal master. So, in no sense is any kind of security under the slave regime possible at any minute.

I guess one thing we could talk about when we talk about the experience of slavery is, sorry, I don't want to get too demographic, but the way in which slavery was constantly changing and moving, and the experience of enslavement was fundamentally an experience of uncertainty. Something like one third of American slaves made the trip from the upper South to the lower South in their lifetime, either because they were sold South or moved South with their masters. Their families, such as they were allowed to have families, were often split up and sundered in a way that they could never regain contact with their closest kin. And this constant churn of the enslaved population is famously recorded in novels like *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and other other enslaved narratives, was a major feature of slavery.

Sometimes we tend to imagine slavery as this stagnant and stable life on a big plantation. But where enslaved people had their routines, worked from sunup to sundown and went

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back to their cabins and had their, yes they were oppressed, but they count on almost the humdrum regularity of life. When in reality, one of the most brutalizing features of slavery was that constant uncertainty of the threat of being sold, the threat of being separated, the threat of being moved to another part of the plantation, which enslaved people had no control over, not even the most minimum control over their personal autonomy or their family lives, which is a psychological violence that I think was so apparent to Solomon Northup when he underwent the experience of slavery and witnessed enslaved families being broken up at auction in Washington DC and in Louisiana, and experienced how enslaved people who potentially resisted their masters could be repaid by being shipped far away from all of their loved ones.

## **Suppression of anti-slavery dissent in the South**

02:07:01:03

Matthew Karp:

One thing that happens in the South after the American Revolution is even as Northern States are moving towards gradual forms of abolition, Southern states, with the rise of the cotton economy, move much more rapidly toward an embrace of chattel slavery as the fundamental labor system, the fundamental basis of labor in the South. So, whereas in, say, colonial Virginia, slavery had existed alongside other intermediate forms of labor coercion or labor bondage like indentured servitude or other forms of apprenticeship, by the antebellum years you really have a stark division between enslaved Black labor and free white labor. And this is increasingly clear both in the North where indentured servitude is also disappearing, which sets the stage for this very sharp contrast between free labor and slave labor that Northerners effectively draw for anti-slavery politics, but in the South it means there's also less and less room for dissent on the question of slavery. So, whereas in the early 19th century, plenty of Southern planters, even Southern slaveholders, like Thomas Jefferson, were free to express their reservations about the morality or the justice of slavery, even as they themselves retained slaves, by the antebellum period there's no space even for that kind of hemming and hawing.

There's no such thing as anti-slavery politics in the South, even in the border South outside from a handful of cities like St. Louis or Louisville. Anti-slavery figures are hounded, sometimes violently, out of the South. In 1856, a bookseller in Mobile, Alabama is escorted from the city at gunpoint because he had sold a copy of Frederick Douglass' autobiography. There's no room, it's a real police state in so many ways that I think sometimes we don't really understand the extent to which the antebellum South was a police state on the question of not just holding a sort of subject population in bondage, but in limiting even the most basic rights of free speech around the subject of slavery, which – the Republican party was barred from existing on the ballot, anti-slavery meetings were disallowed.

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And even the expression of anti-slavery opinion in the form of something as quiet as selling an anti-slavery book resulted in increasingly in state violence against anyone who would have that opinion. So as the South becomes more economically dependent on slavery, its leadership and its institutions become more violently committed to stamping out dissent against slavery.

## **The racialization of slavery in the South**

02:09:44:16

Matthew Karp:

As the labor system in both the North and the South changes across the early 19th century and the emergence of a chattel slave economy – not “the emergence” – and the South consolidates around Black slavery as the foundation of its labor system, while the North consolidates around the idea of free labor. Slavery was always racialized from 17th century Virginia, race had become a tool on the part of the master class to ensure its domination over enslaved people and to win the support from the non slave holding population to sustain the system of bondage. But what happens in the early 19th century is in some ways the racialization of slavery increases with the starkness of an economy in the South that is based on enslaved Black labor and an economy in the North that’s based on free white labor. So questions about the future of slavery and about the future of labor become more obviously and rigidly racialized than even in the colonial period or the revolutionary period.

## **The significance of Lincoln and the Civil War**

02:11:01:12

Matthew Karp:

My view is that the Civil War is the greatest political and social constitutional revolution in American history. And if we can't understand both the achievement and the limits of that revolution, we can't understand American politics, American society, or the American Constitution. Lincoln is at the center of that revolution. He's at the center of the political revolution that breaks up the antebellum two-party system and puts anti-slavery in government, forces in effect the South to secede because the future of slavery is at stake.

Lincoln is at the center of the military and social revolution that is emancipation in the South, in which Republican progress towards emancipation law and the political activity of enslaved people combined to create, to destroy the enslaved system and create emancipation on the ground. And even though Lincoln is shot in 1865, and doesn't preside over the full constitutional revolution of reconstruction, Lincoln symbolizes the Republican party's movement toward that revolution, which would transform the American Constitution and, in effect, write so many principles of the Declaration of Independence even more deeply into that Constitution, which, even if they were not enforced for hundreds

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of years after the counter revolution of the late 19th century, still provide, I think, an essential tool for understanding what America is and what America can be.

The civil war was America's greatest political, social and constitutional revolution. It witnessed the transformation of the American political system, the emergence of an anti-slavery movement that overthrew the antebellum Slave Power, overhauled the two party system that had dominated American politics, and triggered the South's secession from the Union. That mass democratic movement, which Lincoln was at the center of in the election of 1860, set the stage for an even greater social revolution during the civil war itself.

When Republican leaders in Congress, led of course by Lincoln in the White House, in a powerful and subtle way, acting in concert with millions of enslaved people on the ground in the South, developed an alliance – W.E.B. Dubois called it “the abolition democracy” – that in effect achieved America's greatest social revolution on the ground – turned 4 million pieces of enslaved property worth \$3 billion dollars, the largest single chunk of American wealth outside of land in the entire antebellum economy, turned that 3 billion worth of dollars into 4 million free, and, by the end of the Civil War era, legally equal members of the political body – this is a fundamentally revolutionary change in the structure of American society, in the nature of American politics and the meaning of American freedom. And Lincoln was at the center of it. He didn't do it all himself, but he was involved in both the sort of mass political movement that put slavery under threat and the mass social movement and political movement itself from the South, from enslaved people that effectively destroyed the institution on the ground. So if we want to know anything about America, we have to know about the Civil War and we have to know about Abraham Lincoln.