

Clip Two: Lincoln Emerges as an Anti-Slavery Politician

Kerri Greenidge

The abolitionist movement ended up forcing many white Americans who didn't really think about slavery because they didn't live in a slave society. It pushed many of those people to reimagine what the country would look like, which I think is a good lesson that activists can have now.

Steven Hahn

The great changes that take place in almost every society are generated by people who are out of positions of power, but who are placing demands that are increasingly formidable on those who are in positions of power.

Sean Wilentz

Lincoln's reaction was "This is a terrible thing. I don't like the Fugitive Slave Act, but it's constitutional. It's not unconstitutional," and it disappointed a lot of anti-slavery people. That's one of the reasons why Wendell Phillips, the great abolitionist, later on was to refer to Abraham Lincoln as the "Slave Hound of Illinois."

Narration

Lincoln explained his feelings about the Fugitive Slave Law in a letter to his close friend, an enslaver named Joshua Speed.

Lincoln, v/o, letter to Joshua Speed

I acknowledge your rights and my obligations under the Constitution in regard to your slaves. I confess I hate to see the poor creatures hunted down and caught and carried back to their stripes and unrewarded toils, but I bite my lips and keep quiet.

Narration

By the early 1850s, it was clear that inner turmoil alone wasn't going to end slavery. In 1854, Illinois Senator Stephen A. Douglas drafted the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which ended the restriction on slavery's northward spread and let voters decide whether it should exist in new federal territories.

Sean Wilentz

It means now that all bets are off. It means now that the Slave Power [the influence of Southern slaveholders] is on the offensive. It means now that the last protections we had about possibly stopping slavery's expansion, that has been undone..

Kellie Carter Jackson

This is a pivotal moment. Where this territory goes is going to determine the fate of the nation.

Lincoln, v/o

It is wrong – wrong in its direct effect, letting slavery into Kansas and Nebraska – and wrong in its prospective principle, allowing it to spread to every other part of the wide world where men can be found inclined to take it.

James Oakes

And it was really the enactment of the Kansas-Nebraska bill that provoked Lincoln's re-entry into politics. But it's not just a re-entry into politics, it's a transformed Lincoln that enters politics because he is now, for the first time in his life, an anti-slavery politician.