

Why a Nuanced View of History Matters

Interview Thread Transcript

Edward Ayers

Lincoln's reputation, his understanding, has vacillated wildly over generations. But in many ways it was seared into the American consciousness with his assassination. There's a strange alchemy on that. Obviously the people who believed that the end of slavery was a great purpose of the war celebrated Lincoln. Obviously, too, the people who saw the preservation of the United States celebrated Lincoln. What's surprising, in some ways, is that over time, white Southerners came to believe that Lincoln was a great man. It was what happened after his death, in some ways, that made that happen because they certainly hated him at the time he was killed. What happened was "Radical Reconstruction." Lincoln never used those phrases. Matter of fact, his last words were something much like, "I'm thinking about what we might do now. I will be back to you soon." And it's open-ended. So people have imagined that he would have used this great moral capacity for understanding and generosity, that we hear in the second inaugural, that he would have not taken the South through Reconstruction.

We don't know, but by being followed by Andrew Johnson, and then being followed by the radical Republicans and radical reconstructionists – even white Southerners often romanticized Abraham Lincoln and forgot what they'd said about him just months before. So it's a kind of a triangulation.

Black Southerners had complicated ideas as well. Being told that he was the "Great Emancipator," belying all the risks of life that they had made to free themselves. And not only that, but to save the United States has been an unstable identity. There's an admiration for him, but a sense that he's too much of a coherent symbol for white America – that it's white America saving Black America and they know that it's just not the case. So it always feels as if, "Now we figured out Abraham Lincoln. That now we've got all the pieces in place." I think that his identity will always change, as different facets of his accomplishments are seen in a lot of our own time.

Mary Francis Berry

It's important if you want to understand what's going on in the country today, and the kind of future we will have if we do nothing to change it, is to understand that there were conscious decisions made by the people who founded the colonies. When questions were raised about these Black people and what are we going to do with them, that at each step of the way, they had to decide that if they had, if they were a mulatto, they were still

a slave. If they were a Christian, they were still a slave, whatever they were, they were still a slave. If they had to decide that the child follow the condition of the mother, when a white plantation impregnated a slave woman, and there was a child, they made all these conscious decisions and to use Blacks as inputs into their economic system, in order to prosper.

And these decisions one by one were reinforced to make slavery legal and to make the definition of inequality for Black people and inferiority something real. And then it was perpetuated at each point when the question was raised again, as time went on, do we want to do anything about this? And when the answer was no, let's just perpetuate it, or the answer was, as time went on, let's make excuses for it, or let's, you know, whatever – ignore it. Until finally you fast forward to today and you still have people today who cannot accept that this is what the history of the country has been. And when you have them, some of them even try to redefine Lincoln to make him be a person who wasn't doing whatever it was he was doing. But you have to understand that there is a reality. Lincoln stands for acknowledging reality too, and trying to do something about it. And finally, when he came to the conclusion that the whole cause of the war and everything else had been slavery, he acknowledged that there was this race question at the heart of what was going on in the country. And so you have people still today who refuse to acknowledge that if you don't acknowledge it, then you can't solve the problem. If you make excuses, you push it away. You say, well, it really is this way. You have to acknowledge the history.

Lonnie Bunch

As historians, we call this that the North won the war but lost the peace. In many ways, what you see is a conscious effort immediately after the war of returning the South to the way it once was to create a "lost cause" – that this was in essence their version of Camelot. What you see happening, and it's really led often by white Southern women, the Daughters of the Confederacy, they begin to think about – how do you change the narrative? How do you memorialize these stories? Suddenly people like Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson are not people who were traitors who lost the war, they were heroes fighting for a "lost cause." That notion really resonated with the South, it brought many Southerners together, but it also resonated with the North that this was really... And it led to the myths that this was not a war about slavery but a war about brother fighting brother, trying to understand what the United States should be.

In essence, what you see now throughout history, but especially today, is a real need to reckon with those myths, to reckon with the fact that Confederate statues are about white supremacy, not about really the Civil War. To recognize that the challenge is to no longer celebrate the Confederacy as a noble cause, but to help people recognize that if the country is going to heal, if the country is going to find true understanding, then the country has got to really look at its past and shine a bright light on all those dark corners, and to basically say that the Confederacy lost the war. How do we make sure that we tell a truer history so that people can understand that there has been a sometimes quiet insurrection throughout the last 150 years of people trying to undermine Black progress, undermine helping the country live up to its stated ideals. That's a struggle that's going to happen for many years to come.

Justene Hill Edwards

I think it is important to, on the one hand, understand historical figures such as Lincoln in terms of the times in which they lived. I think at the same time, it's not our job to excuse their moral failings. It's to add complexity to a human being that dealt with a wide variety of influences, whose ideas about race and slavery evolved over his lifetime. To understand who he interacted with and how those interactions took place, I think is a really important part of an understanding, not just this history, but the historical figures that created it. And Lincoln is no exception.

I think that that is America's original sin. The fact that it was founded on ideas of freedom, of liberty, of justice. And those ideas were enshrined in founding documents while at the same time the creators of those documents held people of African descent in bondage and profited off of those investments in bondage and in slavery.

I think that this is the fundamental American dilemma, that a part of, I think, being an American citizen is critiquing and debating and criticizing and at times embracing, but being very critical of this original sin. The idea that this nation founded on these lofty ideas will never fully live up to them because of this history. Slavery is an indelible stain that has saturated so many parts of American life, that in many ways, it's hard to separate from how we see America today.

I think part of being an American citizen is critiquing the system under which we live. The founders surely did it with one another. And in many ways it makes our democracy run. And so, I think it's a crucial part of American life and American citizenship.

Bryan Stevenson

I think the era of single leaders guiding us through difficult moments has largely passed. I just think

governance in the United States is no longer entirely in the hands of a president. You've got a tech sector that has huge sway over how people act and think. You have local leaders that can shape attitudes and thoughts at the local level. You have corporations, you have influencers, you have media, all of these institutions are stronger and more influential. I think the idea that a single national leader can address these fundamental challenges is simply not credible, at least to me. I think we all have an obligation to learn our history and to reckon with it. When we do that, we all become equipped to actually achieve the kind of just society that we want, to achieve movement of this country toward that place, where we have equality where there's freedom.

I don't think we can wait any longer for another King or another Lincoln or another anybody. I think the burden is now on us. We've gotten to this place where all of us have access, most of us have access to information. We just have to commit to it. That's why for me, it's important that we understand who our leaders have been, where they succeeded, where they failed. It's important to understand what the institution of slavery was really about. It's important to understand what the Civil War did and didn't do. It's important to understand our history from Reconstruction until the 1960s. It's important to understand what the experience of Blackness and being a person of color is like in this country today. With that understanding, I think we can get where we're trying to go. I'm really persuaded by that.

I don't think you can achieve equality. I don't think you can achieve a healthy community, unless you're willing to engage in truth telling about it. I come from a faith tradition that is rooted in a central idea, and they believe that every... My people believe that all of us can achieve redemption, salvation, fulfillment. They invite people into these spaces where they offer that. They say, "You cannot achieve these things unless you are first willing to confess, to repent." If you come to my church and you say, "I want the heaven and the redemption – I want all that good stuff, but I don't want to talk about anything bad." They'll say, "It doesn't work like that. You've got to first confess. You've got the first repent." It's not just to make you feel bad, but it's because it is a process. When you acknowledge the mistake and the error and the harm and the wrong, you then appreciate the remedy, the repair, the restoration, the reconciliation, the redemption means something to you that you hold on to.

Societies that have moved forward, have moved forward precisely because they've been willing to engage in that truth telling. I wouldn't go to Germany if it was a place where Adolf Hitler statues were everywhere. If they were still celebrating the architects and defenders of the Holocaust and the Third Reich, I wouldn't go there. I'm sorry. I just wouldn't. It wouldn't matter what else they were doing. I would not feel safe in that space. Because there is a reckoning with the Holocaust, because there

are memorials, because you can't go 200 meters without seeing the stones and the other emblems, because there are no Adolf Hitler statues, I'm prepared to go. I'm prepared to respect what's happening there. I know it's not a perfect space, but I understand that there's been some progress. I think that's the reason why you have to commit to truth telling. You commit to truth telling, because you want the reconciliation, you want the restoration, you want the redemption, and you commit to truth and justice because I believe there's something better waiting for us. I really do. I don't talk about this stuff because I want to punish America for lynching and slavery and all of these terrible things. I'm not interested in getting people to confront the realities of slavery because I want to punish America for this. I'm interested in talking about these things because I want to get us to liberation. I really believe there's something better waiting for us. There is something that feels more like freedom, feels more like equality, feels more like justice than anybody in this country has seen collectively. To get there, we have to stop this false history. We have to push back against these false ideas. We have to deal honestly. We have to tell the truth about our history, about who we are and about how we get here.

When we do that, that's when we open ourselves up to the kind of reconciliation, restoration, redemption repair, that I think any broken society needs, any fallen society needs. And we have been broken by this history. There's just no two ways about it. I think the idea that you can overcome an injury, overcome a lethal disease without care and treatment, is just a misguided idea. People die every day holding on to that idea. The people who commit to the care, to the treatment, those are the ones that live and thrive and actually create new hope and new and a new future.

I think what we're seeing today is really dramatic evidence of what happens when you fail to talk honestly about your history. When you actually believe that the best time in American history was 150 years ago, was a hundred years ago, was 50 years ago. If some German leader comes along and says, "Make Germany great again," and they started invoking the Germany of the 1930s, we know enough about what happened to understand

what that represents. But in this country, we are actually so uninformed about our history that we actually think our best days were in some prior past. Well, as a Black person, I'm really confused by it because I really want to know, are you saying our best days were when Black people were enslaved or when we were lynched? When we were excluded and segregated? When we were denied opportunities? Help me understand it. For women, when were the best days? Before they had the right to vote, when they weren't in positions of leadership? When they couldn't have the opportunities that other men had?

It's only because of that false history that you can say some of these things. And I'm less interested in political beliefs and values, but I am interested in a true understanding of who we are. It's like everything else. If you think that smoking doesn't cause cancer, doesn't hurt you and you just keep..., then you're going to see elevated death rates. You just are. When you confront the truth of it, you begin to understand some things about that habit that will cause you to shift your behavior. If you think cancer doesn't kill you and you won't get treatment for it, you're going to die. You're going to see death rates increase. The same is true for a healthy democracy. If you think that you can leave unaddressed this fundamental question of equality and justice and freedom and racial injustice and racial inequality, and be a thriving, healthy democracy, you're going to be sadly mistaken.

We're at a moment in our nation's history where I think that reckoning is upon us. This is an opportunity. We do a lot of things to kind of make it easy for people to not have to talk about this, to not look at this. Well, we see Black people achieving over here, we see Black people achieving over there. We see Black people— that's happening so we don't have to deal with this. It doesn't work like that. This is the fundamental issue. Yes, I do think truth telling about our history has never been more urgent. Truth telling generally, I mean, this is such a time of disinformation and confusion that if we don't commit to truth telling in a really profound way, we're not going to preserve this democracy. We're not going to have the kind of just free America that many of us want to see.