SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL
LINCOLN'S DILEMMA
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

Sidney Blumenthal Interview
04-28-2021
Interviewed by Jackie Olive & Barak Goodman
Total Running Time: 01:17:38

START TC: 00:00:00:00

CREW:

Sidney Blumenthal. Interview, take one. Marker. Okay, give us one moment to settle, Barak, and it's all yours.

The experiences that shaped Lincoln's understanding of slavery

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SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

Abraham Lincoln was born in Kentucky, which was a slave state. And his father, Thomas, was a poor dirt farmer. He was at the low end of his family. His half-brother had inherited a lot of money, but he got nothing. And he was essentially driven out of Kentucky through thievery of his land, and by being forced to compete for wages with slaves who were put out for hire for almost nothing. And they went across the Ohio River, to Indiana, a free state. Lincoln later said that slave states are places for poor white people to remove themselves from, and free States are places for free white people to go to. So the beginning of Lincoln's education begins with his family's migration out of Kentucky.

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As it happened, his parents belonged to a primitive Baptist church that was led by a what was called an "emancipationist preacher." So that was

somewhat unusual in the early part of the 19th century in Kentucky, but the family was anti-slavery. And Lincoln later said, "I am naturally anti-slavery." He didn't unpack his whole family history, but what he meant by it was that it was natural to him. And it in fact, came to him from his family.

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When he came to Illinois at the age of 21, he separated himself from his father and his stepmother and his step brothers, and this whole family that had migrated again from Indiana into Illinois. He was, at 21, free white and 21. Until that time he had been in effect an indentured servant to his father who had been hired out for labor and wages, which his father took. And later in his life, in the year in which he became a Republican, having founded the Illinois Republican Party, at a rally, he said, jokingly, "I used to be a slave, but now they got me practice the law." But he did think of himself as having been a slave, and he resented it.

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SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

And there's an important aspect to that in terms of his empathy. If you read his speeches and his messages, they often are very, very different from the rhetoric of abolitionists. And they're different in an important way. They're different because some of them are from the point of view of the slave. The abolitionists rarely took the point of view of the slave. They attempted to arouse outrage at the slave's condition and sympathy, and even tears. But Lincoln took the point of view of the slave. And in one of his more elaborate statements, he talked about how all the powers of earth had conspired against the slave to put him in his cell, held there by a key that was then dispersed with a hundred keys to a hundred different men in a hundred different locations, held. And then he described the system of power that was constructed upon that, that held this slave in his cell.

SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

Now, Lincoln was not talking abstractly. In this case at the very time he gave that speech, he had been the lawyer for a free Black woman from Springfield. There was a free Black community in Springfield and Lincoln was well aware of it. A block away from his house lived a Black man. Lincoln lived in what we would call a mixed neighborhood today. And the Black man was at one point arrested for being part of the Underground Railroad. Lincoln had all kinds of cases and he is said to have represented fugitive slaves. He certainly gave permission to his law partner, William Henry Herndon, to represent fugitive slaves in cases to protest. But in this one special case, it was a woman named Polly who came to him, was a free Black woman. He represented her as the lawyer and her son, who was a free Black man, had gone down the Mississippi on a boat.

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SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

He had reached New Orleans and been arrested. And either his free papers were taken away or had been lost, and he was about to be sold into slavery and she wanted to know what to do. Now this, for Lincoln, must have brought back memories of the times, the two times, he had been in New Orleans as a very young man taking hogs and grain down the Mississippi there. And described by his cousin who accompanied him as having been shocked by the sights and sounds of slavery surrounding him in New Orleans, including slave auctions in the streets. He was appalled by what he saw. He must've been shocked of this, you know, provincial boy from Illinois. So here's what happens in this case. Lincoln writes the governor of Louisiana and his protest is denied. He goes and sees the governor of Illinois, he's the first Republican elected governor. In fact, he's somebody Lincoln slated as governor and the governor says, "There's nothing I can do, Louisiana won't do anything." So there was only one thing Lincoln could do. And that was, he had to pay the

exorbitant fine. In effect, buying this young man's freedom. In fact, buying somebody who would have been a slave. And so Lincoln sold his own insurance policy to raise the money because he could not raise the money completely in the community and he paid it himself. So when he spoke about all the powers of earth conspired against the slave locked in the cell, he had in mind a particular man who he emancipated with his own money.

A platform opposing the expansion of slavery

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SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

In 1858, Lincoln is running for the Senate against his longtime rival, Stephen A. Douglas, the incumbent Senator. At last, he's getting a chance to challenge him face to face. He announces his candidacy in the Illinois House of Representatives – it's called the Hall of Representatives in the Old State Capitol – with a speech in which he says, "A house divided against itself cannot stand half slave, half free." He also says that slavery will be put on the course of ultimate extinction. He says he does not know how this will happen, but he says the country, the nation, will become all one thing or all the other. Lincoln's advisors, for the most part, tell him not to deliver this speech. It's far too radical. Only his law partner, who's a radical, Herndon, tells him it's okay to do this, but Lincoln does this. His rhetoric has derived from the gospels of a house divided, but it's applied to the country.

SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

This is considered to be a very radical statement at the time. And it was held against Lincoln all the way through. And even in the statements, and the secession that took place in South Carolina, Lincoln is denounced for having spoken about a house divided, half slave, half free, and putting the country on the course of... putting slavery on the course of 'ultimate extinction.' And that

is given as one of the reasons for secession. Lincoln at that time has created the Illinois State Republican Party. He is its leader. He is their candidate for the Senate. It has one plank. It is opposed to the extension of slavery in the territories. He is determined that additional planks not be added because it will fracture this tenuous coalition.

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So even though he is appalled at the arrests and return of fugitive slaves, he is against having a fugitive slave plank, an opposition to it, as part of the platform because it will alienate many of the conservatives and the whole party will then lose and be unable to achieve its basic program. He's trying to hold this together. He calls the federal government going after fugitive slaves ungodly, but he writes a letter to Salmon Chase, the governor of Ohio, who's something of a radical on abolitionism, to please not allow opposition to fugitive slave, capturing fugitive slaves to become part of an official Republican program because it will destroy the ability of the Republican Party to deal with anything. So Lincoln is early on engaged in a juggling act.

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SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

Lincoln has been a tightrope walker for years. Ever since he created the Illinois Republican Party, trying to hold together its tenuous coalition of people who in the past hated each other, members of other parties and movements and causes, and have different views on how to deal with slavery. And only one plank will hold them together, opposition to the extension of slavery. So he is determined to keep that straight and narrow path unblemished by other issues. So Lincoln has to walk across this tightrope and having set his foot on it, he doesn't know where the other side ends and he has to keep walking it, as far as he knows, forever.

The Fort Sumter crisis

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SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

Fort Sumter is a U.S. Army base that is located on an Island in Charleston Harbor. The Army garrison has fled under cover of night on Christmas Eve from Fort Moultrie on land to Fort Sumter. But being an Island, it must be resupplied. So the question is will Lincoln send ships into Charleston Harbor under the canon of the new Confederacy in order to supply the men in that fort? Here's the dilemma. This is federal property. If Lincoln abandons it, then the Confederacy will take that as a tacit admission of recognition of its sovereignty over that territory. But if he resupplies it, the question is, is he precipitating a conflict and acting recklessly? And there is great dissension around him about what to do. His new Secretary of State, his former rival for the Republican nomination, William Seward, is giving orders to withdraw ships supplying Fort Sumter without informing the President.

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And Lincoln is unsure of what to do. And then an advisor, a wise man in Washington comes to see him, Francis P Blair. We're familiar with Blair House across from the White House. Well, that was occupied by Francis P Blair, Francis Preston Blair, who was brought to Washington as just about everyone is brought to Washington, for political reasons by Andrew Jackson and his Kitchen Cabinet to edit a pro-Jackson party partisan newspaper, and he stayed. And he had sons and they had influence in Maryland where they lived, and in Missouri were part of the family lived. And the sons were very political and capable. Montgomery Blair, who Lincoln named his Postmaster General, and Frank Blair Jr., who became a General from Missouri. And Blair says to Lincoln that he has to have a stiff back like Jackson. And he has to resist the call to give in to the Confederacy.

SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

Blair has a memory. And what is the memory? It's a memory of a past incident. It's the nullification crisis of the early 1830s in which South Carolinians, led by John C. Calhoun and the governor of South Carolina, James Hamilton, sought to defy President Jackson on federal law and claim that as a state, they could nullify federal law at will. Jackson sent federal troops, stationed them at the forts around Charleston, and issued a proclamation against nullification calling it treasonous and asserting that the Federal Government had authority over the states given the constitutional basis of the federal union, having created the states rather than being a compact of states as though they were separate nations. Lincoln now has that Proclamation of Nullification on his desk that he is consulting. And he has the living figure of nullification of that crisis sitting with him and telling him that he must act like Jackson to uphold the Federal Union and Lincoln decides to send the supply ship. And as a result of that, the Confederates decide that they will shell it and shell Fort Sumter.

Building the Union army

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SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

Nobody was prepared to fight a protracted war. Lincoln was not. Lincoln, like almost everybody else, believed that there would be in the beginning, one major battle. It would resolve the issue, the war would be over, and that would be the end of it. But after the first battle of Bull Run, a chaotic fiasco, Lincoln realizes not only has the Union lost this battle, but it will take more than one battle. And he also realizes observing the disorganization of the troops and their poor training and how many of them fled the field, that he actually does not have a disciplined, organized army and he has to have one.

And he also realizes he doesn't have a General who can do that, and he has to find a general. So Lincoln is beginning from scratch after Bull Run.

SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

It seems in retrospect that somehow these events are moving slowly because we read about them. But in real time, they're happening with great rapidity. And events are just falling upon Lincoln. And he is responding to them. Lincoln later said, "I have not controlled events, events have controlled me." And this is one of those occasions where Lincoln is trying to figure out what to do. And he's in the midst of chaos. So this is when he discovers General George Brinton McClellan who will organize the army of the Potomac. And from virtually nothing, with the United States not having a real organized, trained army, the Union Army is almost spontaneously generated from all of these volunteers and whipped into shape and trained and trained and trained and trained to Lincoln's impatience.

The Confederate strategy of recognition by England

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SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

We think a lot about what Lincoln's strategies were, but we always have to remember that Lincoln is also responding to the Confederate strategies and they have strategies, and Jefferson Davis, the president of the Confederacy has a strategy too, and the ultimate point of his strategy is to win recognition internationally of the Confederacy, particularly from England, the greatest power in the world, which has the English Navy, which is unsurpassable in its mobility and power.

SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

So the question is, how can he win that recognition. Europe after the failed revolutions of 1848 is, is ruled by reaction. It's ruled by conservative monarchs, who've returned to the throne, who were opposed to the revolutions of liberalism that happened and are determined to suppress them. So the Habsburgs are on the throne in Austria, Hungary, and in France, Napoleon is on the throne and in Italy, the Pope, Pope Pius the ninth is completely hostile to the United States, seeing it as the source of wickedness and evil in the world and explicitly issues something that he calls, the Syllabus of Errors in 1864, denouncing the United States as a source of... And he says it, "Liberalism, the enemy of godliness."

SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

So the question is England. None of them can act without England and England is divided on the question. Some of the mill owners and the aristocracy, the mill owner is connected to the cotton trade in the South, and the aristocracy are hostile to the United States and to Lincoln, but there are other forces in England that are sympathetic. Lincoln himself establishes a relationship with the liberal leader of the parliament, John Bright, and John Bright becomes more or less the member of parliament from the United States in the House of Commons and constantly makes the case. He and Lincoln correspond, and when Lincoln was assassinated, by the way, he had on him, a clipping of a speech by John Bright. When Lincoln says in his second message to the Congress, that the United States is the last best hope of earth, what he means is, and is that the United States is the only liberal democratic republic in Western civilization and it is under siege from all of these powers.

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SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

All the powers of reaction are determined to overthrow and defeat the United States under Lincoln's leadership and wish that the Confederacy would win.

So the Confederate strategy in diplomacy is all aimed at that. That is why Lee, with the army of Northern Virginia, is set into the North to invade twice hoping for a decisive victory that will turn England and lead to recognition.

SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

If the Confederacy is recognized, what happens? Well then, the trade between England and the Confederacy is completely legal and the union blockade in England's eyes can be taken as an act of war, if it stops English ships, which might even lead to a conflict.

SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

Let us not forget that Canada is under the control of the English and that it is a nest for the Confederacy and a place where the Confederates established a center for what become terrorist operations against the North, and the Canadian authorities under English control permit this. So Canada is not a hospitable place to the United States either. So Lincoln has a very difficult diplomatic and geo strategic situation facing him and everything he does has in the background, not only his great goal of preserving the United States as the last best hope of earth, but in order to do that, to prevent the recognition by England of the Confederacy.

Mistrust and Resentment between McClellan and Lincoln

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SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

There was a photograph taken by the great photographer, Mathew Brady with whom Lincoln has an interesting and long relationship, of Lincoln in McClellan's tent conferring. Lincoln is furious with McClellan for not having pressed the campaign swiftly against the Southern forces, but instead plottingly moved down the Peninsula and eventually stopping and then

putting the union army into a bivouac and ending the campaign, the greatest army ever fielded in numbers, equipment, the greatest Naval Armada, all of it ending in nothing, but there's an undercurrent there too, because McClellan is completely hostile to any acts towards emancipation, and even the confiscation acts of using slaves for labor for the union forces and treating them as though they were not slaves, which is of course the road to emancipation.

SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

He's completely hostile to all of this and Lincoln is very aware of this. McClellan is very intent on telling Lincoln of his political objections to emancipation. We don't know what they're saying in that tent. We're not privy to that conversation. There were a number of conversations, but we are aware at least of what was unsaid, and the undercurrents of mistrust and resentment between these two men.

Uncertainty at the end of 1861

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SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

The end of 1861, there is a large party at the White House. McClellan's invited. The decorations are incredible, and McClellan has trained this vast union army, the army of the Potomac, but they have not done anything. They're in winter quarters and Lincoln has lost a battle, the Battle of Bull Run, and his standing is not particularly high. There's a lot of criticism of him from those who insist he'd declare the abolition of slavery without having won any victories. He has no control by the end of 1861 of the West, the victories of Grant, this obscure general Ulysses S. Grant are yet to come at Fort Henry and Fort Donaldson. We have not yet fought the battle of Shiloh. Nothing's secure.

SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

Lincoln is worried about the border States. He's worried about Kentucky. He's worried about Missouri. Everything is unsettled. Everything is disordered, and there's a lot of criticism also of his secretary of war, Simon Cameron, who has been given this job on the basis of a pledge at the convention when the Pennsylvania delegation went for Lincoln and Simon Cameron, a long time and very wealthy Pennsylvania politician, has a reputation of crookedness and has a lot of baggage and he is managerially not competent. So there's a lot of trouble in the cabinet as well.

The White House was an open house

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SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

It's hard for us to imagine now, with the White House surrounded by fences and security forces and gates, that it was an open place, even in the Civil War, and that ordinary people could simply walk up to the White House unannounced and walk in, and then say what they wanted to do and that they wanted to meet the president. All kinds of people showed up, people who wanted pardons, people who especially wanting patronage jobs, people with complaints, crazy people, famous people, all kinds of people. It's extraordinary that Lincoln got anything done, given the constant flood of humanity that was flowing through the White House at that time.

An unusually astute observer of human nature

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SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

Well, I know that Donald Trump has said that his poll numbers were greater than Lincoln's, but the truth is, there were no poll numbers for Lincoln. There were no polls. So how did Lincoln know what the public thought, how did he assess it? Lincoln was a very experienced politician and he knew the public from many angles. He knew them as a lawyer. He knew them as juries. He knew them beginning as a state legislator, he knew them on campaigns and he was very eager to meet people, to learn what they had to say and to analyze it.

SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

He studied voting results. He knew how counties voted around the country. He was as shrewd and knowledgeable as any Politico of his age, but he really loved his public opinion baths, his big meetings with people where they would just talk and he would listen and he got more out of it than they did. He was able to assimilate this kind of information. Lincoln was also somebody who was an unusually astute observer of human nature.

SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

He had seen it in all of its forms on the frontier, and he had seen all kinds of people and was familiar with the wildest characters from con men to Bible thumping preachers, from poor people to wealthy people. He was familiar with, you know, bankers and the wealthiest people in Illinois and he was familiar with P.T. Barnum and he learned a lot. And he learned from everybody and he wanted to hear what they had to say and it gave him a sense what of the essence of politics, the art of the possible and without that, nothing could be achieved.

Lincoln's self-discipline

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SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

The death of Willie Lincoln is a major event in Lincoln's life and presidency, in his marriage, in his family. He certainly loved that boy and he had already lost a son, Edward in Illinois, who had died as a child and to lose Willie while he was president was a terrific blow against him, took Mary, his wife a long time, if ever, to recover and she sequestered herself in grief and mourning. Lincoln had to continue. He had to go on regardless of his morning. Now Lincoln is somebody who wasn't just afflicted with what at that time was called, melancholy, what we might call depression. As a young man he had had suicidal incidents. He may have had manic incidents, but he had learned extraordinarily how to control himself and self-discipline at every level, emotionally, politically, and intellectually was very much his essence and it required a great deal from him to do that, not only because of his past, and not only because of the awful tragedies that befell him, but the horrific circumstances and urgency of them in which he found himself.

Lincoln's internal life

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SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

Probably the person who spent the most time with Lincoln who wrote about Lincoln before he became president, was his law partner, William Henry Herndon, who found Lincoln, of course, warm, humorous, but also distant, sometimes cold and at certain moments, completely abstracted, staring what appeared to be into the distance, but into himself for long periods of time, and Lincoln was working things out.

SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

Lincoln spent a lot of time, both consciously and unconsciously working on himself and on what he had to deal with. So Lincoln's a strange person to be with. He's somebody who wants to, if you're with a room of men, he wants to entertain them, he wants to tell them stories. He wants to draw them in and yet in some ways they feel he's unreachable and he makes his own decisions. What's also interesting about that is that at the end of the day, he is the one who decides. He decides on the emancipation proclamation. He does this in a very lonely way and works it all out himself before he confides in cabinet members, one by one, that he is going to proceed with this. So Lincoln is an isolated man in the midst of many people.

SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

I would say that Lincoln is fundamentally introverted rather than extroverted. While he wants to win people over, he doesn't have a psychological need for that. He can exist on his own. Now in the period of his wilderness, when he was out of politics, you know, he became a prosperous, well-to-do lawyer, not excessively wealthy, but he did well in Central Illinois and he said, "I almost gave up thought of politics," which I don't believe. Nonetheless, you know, Lincoln had resolved himself. He had felt that he could live this life, if he had to, it wasn't the life he really wanted to lead and then politics opened up another path for him.

SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

So Lincoln is somebody who thinks a lot about persuading people, convincing people, what their natures are, who they are, he's looking into them and at the same time, he's keeping his distance and working things out on his own.

Passage of the 1861 Confiscation Act

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SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

Three slaves escaped from a Southern control near Fort Monroe. They escaped into Fort Monroe. They are going to be used for labor there, to help the Confederate army. The general, General Benjamin Butler decides not to give them back. He does not treat them as fugitive slaves. He does not recognize the federal Fugitive Slave Act to return it to this hostile power, the Confederacy. Instead, he decides that since the Confederacy in the South calls slave labor, property, human property, it should be treated under the rules of war as property and confiscated, but that puts the slaves in a different category, a kind of purgatory. They're not fully emancipated, but they're not really slaves. So what is to be done? This triggered a cascade of events that leads to a debate within the Congress and the Congress passes the first Confiscation Act, which states that those slaves that are captured by the Union Army or make their way within Union lines are no longer to be considered as slaves, but to be put to work for the Union cause. And that is the beginning of a process that over time will cascade again and again and again, and lead to emancipation.

SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

You know, today we talk about people having agency, the ability to act on their own and express their purposes. But that phrase existed then, and it was understood that the slaves who had gone into the Union lines had agency of their own, and they were creating facts on the ground that had to be dealt with.

Lincoln's strategy to share the Emancipation Proclamation

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SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

Horace Greeley, with whom Lincoln has had by this time a long relationship, Greeley is an eccentric and very influential editor of the New York Tribune, one of the leading national newspapers in the country and an anti-slavery newspaper, writes a letter urging Lincoln to issue some sort of proclamation of emancipation. Lincoln has already decided he's going to do this. He has already told confidentially certain members of his Cabinet he's going to do this. Lincoln finds this letter to be a very convenient political occasion for him to help prepare public opinion for what he's about to do, so that the public understands that his hand was forced on emancipation and that a conservative public must understand that he had to do it in order to win the war out of military necessity, and that it serves the greater cause that they support of the Union.

SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

And so he says, "If I could save the Union without freeing the slaves, I would do so. If I could save the Union freeing the slaves, I would do so." He's already decided on the latter. So he is telling the public, look how open I am to this, how prudent I am, how conservative I am. But he well knows that Greeley is actually giving him a platform to appeal to these conservatives, to bring them along to the goal that Greeley and the radical abolitionists like, even as they criticize Lincoln. There are moments in this period where Lincoln tells certain abolitionists to publicly criticize him, to organize meetings where he makes statements and says to conservatives, well, look how much criticism I'm getting. So, you know, Lincoln is using Greeley for his greater purposes.

"The dogmas of the past are inadequate to the stormy present"

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SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

Lincoln has a great sense of timing, and he says, "I may be slow, but I never take a step back." And he doesn't want to take a step back because that means that what he has done has been defeated. He wants things to be ripened. He has a parable about a pear tree that ripens, and when the fruit is ready to fall, then it should be harvested. And before then, it would be ruined. So Lincoln thinks a lot about what the political moment is and what the political forces are and where public opinion is. He worries about issuing an emancipation proclamation at the wrong time, and whether or not it's sustainable. The worst thing that could have happened is to have issued one in an unsustainable political situation. And that was one of Lincoln's fears.

SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

When Lincoln says, "We cannot escape history," and he says, "The dogmas of the past are inadequate to the stormy present." He also says later in it that freeing the slaves will free us. This is very much about slavery. And when he says "We cannot escape history," it is our history. And it is in this message that he talks about the United States as the last, best hope of Earth. So think about it. He is talking about the United States as the shining example to the world, holding up the beacon of Liberty. And at the same time that we cannot escape our own history, our own past, the weight of slavery. And in order to become this last, best hope, we have to deal with our own past or else we will not be what we claim to be in the future.

A war to defeat 'Slave Power'

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SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

Lincoln believes that this is about saving the Union and ending slavery and defeating the Slave Power, and destroying the slave power, which is a formidable economic and political entity that has come to be called the

Confederacy. And before that, his election. Before his election, had controlled the federal government. So these things are not unentangled, they are all of a piece. And in order to save the Union, he must end slavery. And it's not that he has come to that conclusion – it is that he reaches his action on it at the politically propitious moment when it can be sustained and as the events unfold, which he could not foresee as they were happening.

The practical effect of the Emancipation Proclamation within the Civil War

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SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

Emancipation Proclamation is the greatest expropriation of private property in the history of mankind to that moment. It is unimaginable. And in 1864, an artist named Francis Carpenter comes to the White House. He is somebody who has painted portraits of presidents in the past. He's painted the portrait of Franklin Pierce. And he tells Lincoln, "I want to paint a grand painting of the moment when you are deciding to sign the Emancipation Proclamation." It is the greatest moment in human history. Certainly Frederick Douglass felt that, and many people in the United States felt that this was a transformation of the very idea of the United States. And Lincoln himself calls it a new birth of freedom at Gettysburg.

SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

Lincoln brings in Carpenter, who lives in the White House for six months painting this portrait. And he writes a book about it called *Six Months At the White House*. The painting itself now hangs in the U.S. Senate. It shows Lincoln with his Cabinet. The book, in my opinion, is better than the painting, because it records conversations with Lincoln as events are happening, including Lincoln's reflections on how he came to issue the Emancipation Proclamation and how he had to deal with military defeats, with obstinate

and difficult generals, with events that had turned against him, and political circumstances that were very unstable and uneasy.

SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

The Emancipation Proclamation declares that slavery will end when the war ends and the United States is victorious. And it does have a practical effect because, wherever the Union army is in the South, beyond the Confiscation Acts, it is an army of liberation, an army of deliverance, and the word spreads. And the nature of the war has been explicitly transformed. It is a war to end slavery, which is the fundamental economic basis of the American South and the Confederacy, and according to the Confederate Constitution, it's very reason for being. And what Lincoln has said is that, that very reason for being will be made-- is henceforth and forever ended.

Photography and the Civil War

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SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

The role of photography in the Civil War is the first time that images of warfare make their way into public view. This has never happened before. Now, Brady sends a corps of photographers at his own expense, which in the end bankrupts him and ruins him financially, out onto the battlefields. And they take pictures of the horrific consequences of the battles. And these photographs did not appear in the newspapers, but they were shown at one point in a gallery in New York and the public mobbed them. And they wanted to see what the war was really like.

SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

I don't have the slightest doubt that Lincoln saw these photographs. He was in and out of the photographic studios of Alexander Gardner, who had been Brady's lead photographer and gone off and created his own studio in Washington. Many of the most famous portraits of Lincoln were made by Gardener at sittings at his studio. And he had all the photos. There's no question. There could be no question that Lincoln saw what happened on these battlefields, not just heard them, not just read reports, not just heard eye witnesses, and not just saw drawings, but saw the photographs. And for the first time, the horrors of war in their full reality were brought to him and to the people at large.

Civil War hospitals

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SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

Lincoln and Mary visited many of the hospitals around Washington and visited with the wounded soldiers. The wounds were- are horrific. Let's remember that one of the nurses was somebody whose name was Walt Whitman, who was so shattered by the experience that he eventually had to leave Washington. Just the day to day experience of seeing these young men in their condition was shattering. And Lincoln spent a good deal of time. Medicine, from our point of view, was primitive, and there were a lot of amputations. Germ theory did not exist. Lincoln, however, believed in public health and was a major supporter of what was called the Sanitary Commission, was the beginning of the Red Cross and what became U.S. Public Health Service. All of that begins in the Civil War, and Lincoln was very scientifically minded and open to any scientific advance in medicine.

The importance of Gettysburg

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SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

Lee had brought his army for the second invasion of the North, into Pennsylvania. Nobody chose that battlefield. It happened through the collision of forces, and it was a decisive defeat for the Confederacy in his second invasion. Lee was hoping for a victory that would bring about, he hoped, English recognition of the Confederacy. It was, if he had won a great battle in the North, the idea was that England might recognize the Confederacy. Furthermore, Lee and the Confederates were trying to destabilize Lincoln politically going into his reelection campaign. And if they could upset Lincoln so that he was defeated politically, then they believed they could win that way. If the Democrats, who were heavily influenced by the Copperheads, or peace Democrats that favored recognition of the Confederacy, would prevail, then that would be a victory too for the Confederacy. So Lee had great strategic purposes in this invasion and they were repelled.

SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

Lee survived and the Army of Northern Virginia survived. Lincoln was enraged at General Meade that he didn't pursue Lee and felt that he could have achieved the destruction of the Confederate force. Nonetheless, it was the end of the invasions of the North. And the Confederacy was in a downward spiral militarily in terms of manpower especially. It was a war of attrition. The North had endless sources of manpower, and every battle that Lee fought and lost and lost men, men that they were irreplaceable. And so the balance of military power tipped and it especially tipped after that battle.

Delivering The Gettysburg Address

00:58:59:00

SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

Lincoln was invited to deliver the dedication to the military cemetery at Gettysburg. There was another speaker, Edward Everett, who had been the former everything, from president of Harvard University to governor of Massachusetts to Secretary of State, and was known as the greatest orator of his day, in the old fashioned style of Victorian Shakespearian actors who hold forth forever. Lincoln came to Gettysburg on a train. He was accompanied by Seward and he reached Gettysburg, and we know that he famously spoke for a very short period of time.

SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

To me, Lincoln's Gettysburg Address uses his touchstone of the Declaration of Independence as the basis of the founding of the American Republic, and he dedicates this cemetery and the entire Union cause to the idea of the declaration, all men are created equal. But he has not backward-looking. This is a living document that Lincoln is central to the constitution and also forward-looking. And on that basis, he declares, through this sacrifice, that there has been a new birth of freedom. This is, in its own way, a discussion on Lincoln's part of crucifixion and resurrection. And it is not simply the soldiers, themselves, who have undergone that process, but the nation.

SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

The nation is surrounded by death and suffering, and what's the purpose? And the purpose is for this greater cause, and for these higher principles, and for a belief that all men are created equal, which is why we have this particular nation. And on the basis of having waged this struggle, something new has emerged, and it is this nation built on an enduring principle. But it is become in a peculiarly American way a new nation, a new birth of freedom. And that is what the Civil War has become for Lincoln, in which he expresses in his distilled language.

The Gettysburg Address in American history

01:02:15:00

SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

Lincoln knew what it was- what the war was being fought for, and there are elements of the Gettysburg Address that have been part of Lincoln's constitution, his personal being for decades. The phrase, "of the people, by the people, and for the people," has its origins in a famous oration by Daniel Webster in his second reply to Hayne in the Congress in which Webster defines the federal union as opposed to the states' rights version of the Constitution.

SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

And Lincoln knows this by heart. He has committed Webster's paration to memory long ago when he was a young man. And it comes to him again in the writing of this speech, and he has put together ideas that are not second nature to him, but in the forefront of his mind and have been all along that he wants to express at this moment and particularly at a cemetery, at a solemn place where so many have given their lives, and to explain what their sacrifice has been and what the suffering of the nation has been for a higher cause.

Well, Lincoln's language is always plain and lucid. It lacks a lot of the errors of some speeches. It's not vague.

SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

They probably did not know that this would be one of the speeches that would endure in American history and wind up with the second inaugural being engraved in a Lincoln Memorial on the National Mall. They did not know that. The first publication of what was called the Gettysburg Address was of Edward Everett's speech and did not include Lincoln's. So that was the

original Gettysburg Address, was the Iliad-length Everett speech and not Lincoln's brief words.

SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

So it was printed in the newspapers. People congratulated him. Some people recognized the concision and how deep it went at the time. It really was not until it was included in school textbooks later that ordinary Americans would see this as part of the national canon, and school children memorized it from McGuffey's Reader. My grandfather had a McGuffey's Reader that I inherited, and it had the Gettysburg Address in it.

The Second Inaugural Address

01:05:45:00

SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

The second inaugural is a speech with many purposes. It is theological. It is national. It is political. It is a lawyer's refutation. It is many things at once without ever stating that. It is a refutation of particularly, on Lincoln's part as a forensic lawyer, of the Confederate case for slavery and the war. It is a refutation of the idea that the North and the Union were responsible for the war by not allowing the Confederacy to just go on its merry way. It is a refutation of the idea that slavery was not at the bottom of the reasons for the war, that it was not the cause of the war. It is a refutation of Southern theology that justified slavery. It is all of these things at once. This is Lincoln the lawyer, making a case, and it's his greatest case.

SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

The Confederates always claim that God was on their side, and that God had decreed slavery, that it was eternal. It was in the Bible. There were many, many books written before the war by Southern theologians justifying

slavery on the basis of the Bible. And Lincoln says we don't know what's on God's mind. Both sides claimed God's blessing in the war, but we do know what has happened here.

SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

And in describing the end of slavery, which he, as president, and the Union army had brought about, he ascribes it to the judgments of the Lord, true and righteous altogether. And those judgments of the Lord then sit upon, without saying it, the sinfulness of slavery and the Confederacy for having put the nation through this bloody conflict in order to preserve it. And he has turned theology that the Confederates had waved, and remember the Confederate Constitution claims God, and there is no mention in the United States Constitution of God, and Lincoln turns it against the very basis of the Confederacy, which is slavery.

Lincoln's assassination

01:09:08:00

SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

Lincoln loved going to the theater. The theater for religious people at the time was considered to be somewhat sinful. And the theater was considered to be the workshop of the devil. Actors and actresses were low-life people. They were not refined, but Lincoln loved it. He loved Shakespeare especially, and he loved to speak with actors, he liked to meet them. And he even met Edwin Booth a number of times including a dinner at Seward's house. And they were very friendly, and Booth was a... Edwin Booth, a major supporter of the Union and of Lincoln, another motive for his rebellious younger brother.

Lincoln was told not to go to the theater by many people, some who feared for his safety, but there was another reason. Here he is, President, and he's

going to the theater on Good Friday, which is a holy day. And he's going to a comedy. It's kind of frivolous. Washington is, at that moment, still in an ecstatic state after the Battle at Appomattox and the surrender of Lee and his army. And there's a kind of holiday atmosphere in the town, and Lincoln wants nothing more than to go to the theater, be relieved, see a comedy. He really can't get anyone to go with him. He asked Grant. Grant's wife doesn't want to go. She doesn't like Mary. He goes down a list, and finally goes with a young couple who live in Lafayette Square who were the daughter of a senator from New York and her husband, a major.

SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

And it is Good Friday, and Lincoln is shot on Good Friday, and this and his death lead the Easter. And there was a popular feeling that he had been martyred. He had given his life and he had for the nation and for the cause. He was considered to be Christ-like at that moment. So this man who had suffered, in a Shakespearian phrase, the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune all through his presidency, and the oscillations of popularity, been smeared as Abraham Africanus I in his reelection campaign, appeared as though he would face certain defeat, was excoriated in newspapers, was called a gorilla by his general, was now America's Christ.

01:12:38:00

SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

Lincoln was carried from the theater, Ford's Theater, across the street to a boarding house, the Peterson house, and laid sideways across a bed in a small bedroom. Mary was there and hysterical. And over time, there are doctors who cannot help him, and then men come and go. And these are many of the great figures of the time, of the Civil War, his cabinet members, Charles Sumner, the abolitionist senator from Massachusetts is by the bedside.

Edwin Stanton hears the word at this house. He's astonished. He rushes there and takes control of the government and maintains its viability through the entire crisis, stays up all night. They learned that Seward has been the victim of an assassination attempt, has been stabbed multiple times. They don't know who else might be attacked. There's still an atmosphere of chaos and of menace. And no one knows how far and how deep this conspiracy goes, and there are many of these great figures in the government standing around this bed as Lincoln is wheezing his last breaths.

SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

Sometime later, Charles Dickens comes to Washington, and he has dinner with Edwin Stanton, the Secretary of War, and Charles Sumner. And Dickens says it was the greatest evening of his life because for hours they recounted to him, in minute detail, what it was like to sit around the bed of Abraham Lincoln as he died and the sound of his breath as it passed away. And for the great dramatic novelist, for Dickens, it was the greatest scene of them all.

What Lincoln learned as a one term Congressman

01:15:20:00

SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

Lincoln, when he was a Congressman, served for one term. He was obscure. No one paid much attention to him, and he lived in a boarding house, a row of boarding houses that face the Capitol, directly across from the Capitol. On that site now is the Library of Congress. The particular boarding house he lived in was known as “abolition house” informally. It's where a number of the most prominent abolitionist congressmen lived and where they frequented.

SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

A lot of things happened to him then, and it's relevant to what happens in terms of emancipation in the District of Columbia later when he's president. Slave hunters come in the house, and they arrest waiters who they claim are fugitive slaves and drag them away. The house is a kind of underground railroad, and Lincoln, at the end of his term as Congressman, with the advice of some of these abolitionist figures like Joshua Giddings of Ohio, writes a bill for emancipation in the District of Columbia. It's gradual emancipation. It's compensated emancipation. It's emancipation. It's what he thinks is possible. It receives not a single hearing. He is denounced in the Senate by John C. Calhoun, but not by name. It is the most notable instance of a mention of Lincoln in his period as a congressman.

SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL:

Flash forward. Lincoln declares emancipation in the District of Columbia as president. It's compensated emancipation. The slaveholders in Washington are compensated. The federal government pays, and the slaves are freed. And to this day, in the District of Columbia, this is a holiday in Washington.

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