

Film Clips Transcript

Clip One: Myth of the “Great Emancipator”

Male Protester: This statue represents the oppression of Black people.

Chris Bonner: There’s this myth of Lincoln as “the Great Emancipator.” The idea is that Lincoln was the driving force behind the eradication of slavery in the Civil War era.

Jelani Cobb: This is the beneficent father who bestows upon the benighted slave his long, mislaid freedom.

Female Protester #1: This is a memorial to the white saviorism that was Abraham Lincoln.

Female Protester #2: That’s your opinion, and...

Female Protester: Abraham Lincoln was not an abolitionist, get that through your thick skulls. He does not deserve this platform.

Kellie Carter Jackson: He did not start his presidency to be “the Great Emancipator”. He wanted to be the great unifier, the person that brought the country back together again.

Edward Widmer: The phrase “the Great Emancipator” – it’s not a phrase Lincoln asked to be applied to himself. And we can do better beginning with the recognition that emancipation began with the emancipated.

Keri Greenidge: Lincoln, like most white Americans at the time, was forced to reckon with slavery and its consequences due to Black people themselves.

Male Protester: *You can’t trust this country to tell the truth when it comes to what happens to our people, to Black people. And, of course, a country that does that creates these types of symbols. Of course it does.*

David Reynolds: Somebody said about Abraham Lincoln, he was inwardly truly radical. However, to get ahead he had to muffle and restrain that inner radicalism.

Sean Wilentz: He wasn’t being conservative, he was being political. Now, you can say that being political is a terribly immoral thing. Well, that may be true, unless you’re a politician, and unless you’re a president.

Female Protester #1: As a federal taxpayer we do own that statue.

Female Protester #2: We all own it, okay?

Female Protester #1: So you don’t get to tear it down.

Female Protester #2: This is chocolate city, bitch. This is chocolate city, bitch. This is chocolate city.

Female protester #1: You don’t get to decide for everybody.

Bryan Stevenson: What we are seeing today is really dramatic evidence of what happens when you fail to talk honestly about your history. We have to tell the truth about who we are and about how we get here.

Male Protester: That is why we are tearing this statue down...

Jelani Cobb: We can’t know or understand Lincoln at the same time that we have an emotional investment in preserving him as a savior. But it is in understanding the trial and error and the failures and the shortcomings and the contradictions that he becomes most useful to us. And really, only by understanding the things he got wrong can we really grasp the magnitude and importance of the things that he got right.

Clip Two: Freedom and Equality

Narrator: On the morning of November 19th, Lincoln mounted a horse and rode to the new cemetery at Gettysburg. The crowd parted to let him through.

George Gitt, a 15-year-old local boy, hid among the large boxes underneath the speakers’ dais. He waited for two hours while Edward Everett, the featured speaker, labored through his oration.

George Gitt, v/o: *When Everett finished speaking, Lincoln slowly took his hand from his chin, bent slightly forward, and very deliberately drew from an inner pocket of his coat a few flimsy pieces of paper. Tucking away the papers, he arose, and very slowly stepped to the front of the platform.*

Lincoln, v/o: *Fourscore and seven years ago our fathers brought forth, on this continent, a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal. Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived, and so dedicated, can long endure.*

HANDOUT TWO, LESSON THREE

We are met on a great battlefield of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting-place for those who here gave their lives, that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this. But, in a larger sense, we cannot dedicate, we cannot consecrate – we cannot hallow – this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it far above our poor power to add or detract.

The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us, the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work, which they who fought here have thus so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us – that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they here gave the last full measure of devotion – that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain – that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

Edward Widmer: The key phrase, I think it's only four words long. It's the "new birth of freedom," The early idea of America, the Constitution and the – all those millions of compromises with the South, that – that's over now, and we're going to win this war and we're going to build a better country than we ever had.

Chris Bonner: Chris What he's saying is that, "I have started to care in a new way about African Americans," that the Union is insufficient, that the Union is perhaps even meaningless without actually making real this idea that all men are created equal.

Narrator: Lincoln's speech was 272 words. But Edward Everett understood the magnitude of what he'd just heard. "I should be glad," he said, "if I came as near to the central idea of the occasion in two hours as you did in two minutes."

On the train ride home, Lincoln fell ill with a high fever; it was smallpox. Beside him was a Black man, his valet William Johnson, who had come with him to Washington from Springfield.

For the next two weeks, he tended to the ailing President. Lincoln recovered, but Johnson would not. In January 1864, he died of smallpox, likely contracted from Lincoln himself.

Though a free man who had died in the course of serving a President, Johnson never enjoyed his full rights as an American citizen.

Frederick Douglass, v/o: *Men talk about saving the Union and restoring the Union as it was. What business have we to fight for the old Union? We are fighting for something incomparably better than the old Union. We are fighting for unity; unity of idea, unity of sentiment in which there shall be no North, no South, no East, no West, no Black, no white, but a solidarity of the nation, making every slave free, and every free man a voter.*

Chris Bonner: I think that it's really important that we recognize that there's a difference between freedom and equality, and fundamentally, freed people // were not enslaved. They had that fundamental right of, you know, like liberty of person. But that was not the end. That was not all that Black folks wanted. There was an understanding that freedom and equality were different things and that both of them were desirable, that freedom itself was not enough.