



# LINCOLN'S DILEMMA

## LESSON TWO - FROM ANTI-SLAVERY TO ABOLITION



### ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- What were the events and who were the people that influenced Lincoln's opposition to slavery?
- Did Lincoln become an abolitionist?

In this lesson, students will conduct independent research and apply skills of historical analysis to trace the evolution of Abraham Lincoln's position on the abolishment of slavery within the United States. Select film clips from the second episode of *Lincoln's Dilemma*, edited interviews created in the production of the film, archival photographs, and historical documents will support student exploration and help them understand how or whether Lincoln's thinking on abolition evolved.



### LESSON OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- **Trace** the historical events that impacted Lincoln's evolution of thought on the institution of slavery before and throughout the Civil War
- **Learn** about the individuals who significantly influenced Lincoln's understanding and empathic response to enslaved people
- **Analyze** the purpose and limitations of the Emancipation Proclamation



One or Two  
55-minute class  
periods



American Studies,  
African American  
History, US History  
(Honors/AP),  
Government (Honors/  
AP)



- Equipment to screen film clips and interview threads
- Copies of Handouts:
  - Handout One: *Lincoln's Dilemma* Learning Log
  - Handout Two: Film Clip Transcripts
  - Handouts Three, Four, and Five: Interview Thread Transcripts
  - Handout Seven: The Emancipation Proclamation
  - Handout Eight: "Our Work Is Not Yet Done"
  - Handout Nine: Further Suggested Speeches and Documents

# ACTIVITIES



“Let’s not forget that Lincoln was a politician, first and foremost, and his goal, especially during the war, was to bring the Confederacy back into the Union fold. And this question of slavery was such a hot button issue, even before his presidency, that Lincoln had a very clear sense of the stakes, of coming out in support of abolishing slavery versus taking a more moderate approach.”



**JUSTENE HILL EDWARDS**  
ASSISTANT PROFESSOR AND HISTORIAN, UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA



## OPENING

In pairs, have students interview one another with the following questions:

- When was the last time you changed your mind about an idea or opinion?
- What was it that moved you to change? Was it a personal experience? A friend's opinion? An article you read?
- Do you think Lincoln's anti-slavery position changes after he became president?
- Drawing on background knowledge, what do you think might need to happen in order to change his thinking?

## HISTORICAL INVESTIGATION



**Teacher Note:** The question of Lincoln's views and stance on slavery, and whether he became fully committed to the cause of abolition, remains a salient and rich historical conversation. Explain to students that in Lesson Two they will be exercising their historical thinking skills to independently explore a range of different resources to come to their own conclusions based on evidence. This exercise may take one or two class periods.



### Distribute Handout One: *Lincoln's Dilemma* Learning Log

The following collection of historical resources is available for student investigation. Students will independently review these resources in order to answer the essential questions of this lesson:

- What were the events and who were the people that influenced Lincoln's opposition to slavery?
- Did Lincoln become an abolitionist?



### Resources

- **Film Clips from *Lincoln's Dilemma*** (9 min total)
- **Archival Photos** for visual reference
- **Interview Threads** – Insights from historians (up to 40 min. of video total but can be shortened by using the transcripts)
- **Historical Documents** – Two documents are included, along with suggestions for others that may be of interest: The Emancipation Proclamation and Frederick Douglass' speech "Our Work is Not Done"

## ANALYZING FILM AS TEXT



**Teacher Note:** Let students know that the following clips from **Lincoln's Dilemma** take place after the 1860 election, when Southern states began to secede from the Union and formed the Confederacy. Students can use **Handout Two: Film Clip Transcript** to follow along, underlining or highlighting ideas, names, or concepts that stand out as important or that they would like to learn more about.

### **Watch Film Clip One: Before the Presidency (3:58)**

This segment shows how some Southern states started to secede from the Union after Lincoln won the 1860 Presidential election. Lincoln is trying to keep the Union together, and has multiple ideas for how to stop the expansion of slavery and/or end slavery, through gradual emancipation and through colonization, sending formerly enslaved people to the newly founded African country of Liberia.

### **Watch Film Clip Two: Influenced by Enslaved People (4:47)**

In this clip, Abraham Lincoln's thinking starts to shift towards emancipation for multiple reasons, including his own personal experiences meeting formerly enslaved people in "contraband camps," through meetings with Black and white abolitionists, and because the Union military needed more soldiers.



## ANALYZING IMAGES



**Teacher Note:** Students will use visual analysis of historical photographs to further explore the question of whether and how Lincoln moved from anti-slavery to abolition during his presidency.

Print or project the photos, or make them available in a shared online space, and ask students to answer the following questions:



### DISCUSS

- Describe what you see in the photo.
- If you could talk to the photographer, what would you want to ask about the photo?
- In what way do you think these photos might be relevant to understanding the context of Abraham Lincoln's presidency?



Formerly enslaved people escaping by fording the Rappahannock River, VA, August, 1862 (Courtesy of Library of Congress)  
<https://www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/cwpb.00218/>



William Headly, escaped enslaved man, Raleigh, NC, ca 1862 (Courtesy of Library of Congress) <https://www.loc.gov/item/2010647919/>



Two young Black men stand with food baskets and cutlery behind a group of seated white officers, Camp of the 93rd New York Infantry, Bealton, VA, August, 1863 (Courtesy of Library of Congress) <http://loc.gov/pictures/resource/cwpb.00819/>



Sergeant A.M. Chandler and Silas Chandler, an enslaved man, ca. 1861 (Courtesy of Library of Congress) <https://www.loc.gov/item/2014647512>

Unidentified African American Union soldier, with his wife and two daughters, ca. May 1863 (Courtesy of Library of Congress) <https://www.loc.gov/resource/ppmsca.36454>



## A CLOSE VIEW: INTERVIEW THREADS



**Teacher Note:** The filmmakers conducted over 30 interviews to produce *Lincoln's Dilemma*. The full interviews are available in the [Interview Archive on the Kunhardt Film Foundation website](#). A selection of these interviews, edited together here to create *Interview Threads* and aligned to the specific lesson topic, are available for your students' learning.

These Interview Threads will deepen students' understanding of Lincoln and his views, and also the specific influences of the other members of his party as well as the broader abolitionist movement. Students can follow along and take notes using the transcripts included in **Handouts Three, Four, Five, and Six**.

- **Lincoln and the Republican Party:** Abraham Lincoln's position and views within the brand new Republican Party.
- **Lincoln's Evolution on Slavery:** Different perspectives on Lincoln's views about slavery from his youth through the Civil War.
- **Abolitionist Movement:** The work and actions of the abolitionist movement, active since the beginning of slavery, during Lincoln's formative years as a young man and politician and during his Presidency.
- **The Importance of Women Abolitionists:** The work of women abolitionists, whose stories have been broadly overlooked.

## HISTORICAL DOCUMENTS



**Teacher Note:** Two documents are included: *The Emancipation Proclamation* and an excerpt from abolitionist Frederick Douglass' speech "Our Work is Not Yet Done." A list of other speeches by Lincoln and Douglass are included below.

### Handout Seven: The Emancipation Proclamation

The Emancipation Proclamation, issued January 1, 1863, marks a critical juncture in the Civil War. This Presidential Proclamation<sup>1</sup> officially freed the enslaved people in the Southern states, parishes, and counties that had joined the Confederacy, and it allowed formerly enslaved people to join the Union Army. It did not free enslaved people in the border states.

### Handout Eight: "Our Work is Not Yet Done"

In this speech, Frederick Douglass describes meeting Lincoln to demand equal treatment of Black soldiers in the Union Army.

### Other Speeches by Abraham Lincoln

- [Peoria Speech](#), October 16, 1854, in which Lincoln articulates why he disagrees with the Kansas–Nebraska Act.
- [Cooper Union Address](#): February 27, 1860, in which Lincoln describes what he believes are the anti-slavery intentions of the signers of the Constitution.
- [Gettysburg Address](#): November 19, 1863, in which Lincoln articulates that abolition is a primary goal of the Civil War.

### Further Writings from Frederick Douglass

- January 26, 1849 – [On Colonization](#)
- February, 1861 – ["The Union and How to Save It"](#)
- Legislation – [2nd Confiscation Act](#), in which Congress can fine or imprison anyone in rebellion against the Union (members of the Confederacy), and if they are enslavers, their enslaved people will be freed.

### Handout One: *Lincoln's Dilemma* Learning Log

Remind students to record and synthesize their learning using **Handout One: *Lincoln's Dilemma* Learning Log**. Let students know they will be referring back to their Learning Log in order to complete their Final Project, proposing a memorial to this era of American history.

<sup>1</sup> <https://guides.loc.gov/executive-orders/order-proclamation-memorandum>

For each historical resource, record your reflections, thoughts, and ideas about the influences, events, and people that influenced President Lincoln's opposition to slavery.

What questions would you like to further explore about Abraham Lincoln and his role in Emancipation and the Civil War?

**Film Clips**

**Archival Photos**

**Interview Threads**

**Historical Documents and Speeches**

**Questions and Notes for Final Project**

What ideas did you take away about the struggle for freedom *and* equality in our nation with regard to:

Abraham Lincoln?

Individuals and activists around Abraham Lincoln?

Ideas, concepts, and events that led to the Civil War and Emancipation?

## Film Clip Transcripts

### Clip One: Before the Presidency

**Eric Foner:** Lincoln is always evolving in the sense that he's a very open-minded person. He is not stuck in his ways. He's aware that, in a crisis like this, old ideas may no longer be relevant.

**Narration:** Lincoln clung to his tightrope. He would try to coax the still-loyal border states to give up slavery voluntarily, but if he pushed too hard they might defect. Lose them, he believed, and he would lose the war.

**Edna Greene Medford:** He knows that the Confederacy, those states are lost. That they're gone. Those 11 are gone out of the Union, but he doesn't want to do anything to upset the four that are still in the Union.

**Lincoln, v/o:** *I think to lose Kentucky is nearly the same as to lose the whole game. Kentucky gone, we can not hold Missouri, nor, as I think, Maryland. . . . We would as well consent to separation at once, including the surrender of this capital.*

**Edna Greene Medford:** He started pressuring – perhaps that's too strong a word – encouraging, the border states that, if they started to end slavery on their own, then the Confederacy would understand that it would never get any larger and they might come to their senses and return to the Union.

**Michael Burlingame:** In March of 1862, he puts forward this proposal. He says, "Let's have the Congress appropriate money to be given to any state whose government abolishes slavery. And let's adopt gradual emancipation. And let's also make part of the package colonization." That is any Blacks who want to leave shall have government support and we will try to find a haven or refuge for those people who voluntarily want to leave.

**Narration:** For years, many Northern politicians had linked their anti-slavery support with the idea of colonization.

Freed American slaves would be convinced to return to Africa or the Caribbean. The message was: You should be free. Just, not here.

**Eric Foner:** This was always the question when you talked about abolishing slavery. Well, what is going to happen to these emancipated slaves? Are they going to remain in the United States? Are they going to be citizens? What kind of rights are they going to have, if any?

The fact that Lincoln promoted this idea of colonization for about ten years doesn't fit with a lot of people's image of Lincoln. Let's just put it that way. The "Great Emancipator." But I think you have to take Lincoln at his word. Lincoln did believe in this plan. It is part of a plan for getting rid of slavery.

**Lincoln, v/o:** *If all earthly power were given me, I should not know what to do, as to the existing institution. My first impulse would be to free all the slaves, and send them to Liberia – to their own native land. But a moment's reflection would convince me, that whatever of high hope there may be in this, its sudden execution is impossible. What then?... Free them, and make them politically and socially our equals? My own feelings will not admit of this; and if mine would, we well know that those of the great mass of white people will not.*

**Kellie Carter Jackson:** Lincoln does not want slavery, but that does not necessarily mean that he wants Black people to be free, or that he wants black people to be enfranchised, or that he wants Black people to be seen as equal.

**Edna Greene Medford:** Lincoln understood his people and understood the challenges they would have in accepting Black people as free. The problem was, though, his solution was remove Black people, not try to talk your people into understanding that Black people had a right to be in this country because Black people built the country.

### Clip Two: Influenced by Enslaved People

**Narration:** Lincoln wouldn't allow fugitive slaves to enlist in the Union Army. But a trio of enslaved men began to force his hand on emancipation.

**Michael Burlingame:** The question of what to do with fugitive slaves who came to Union lines was raised very early in the war, in the spring of 1861 when three slaves come to Fort Monroe at the confluence of the York and James rivers, a huge Union fortification.

**John Cooper:** Frank Baker, James Townsend, and Shepard Mallory are building fortifications near Fort Monroe. They know that they are going to be moved south. And the Union is right there. They get in a boat under cover of darkness and they row to Fort Monroe and they take their chances.

**Narration:** The commander at Fort Monroe, General Benjamin Butler, had no official policy to guide him on what to do with escapees.

**Michael Burlingame:** Benjamin Butler says, "Come on in." Well, the next day, the slave owner says, "There is this statute called the Fugitive Slave Law that says you're obliged to return the fugitive slaves to me." And Benjamin Butler, very clever, is a lawyer, says, "Ahem, the Fugitive Slave Act applies to the United States. You claim that you're no longer members of the United States, and

therefore, we're not going to return these slaves to you."

**Narration:** Butler's order placed the matter of fugitives squarely in Lincoln's lap. Rather than force the escapees back into bondage, Lincoln supported his major general.

**Chris Bonner:** Contraband comes to be the term under which enslaved African Americans were named. It was what they were called throughout the Civil War.

**Lonnie Bunch:** In some ways, contraband is a horrible word, but it's almost an appropriate word because they were not seen as human. They were really seen as property to fulfill the needs of the country.

**Narration:** Word spread, and within weeks hundreds of escapees streamed into Fort Monroe, setting up a large "contraband" camp just outside its gates.

Soon, contraband camps popped up all over the upper South.

**Lonnie Bunch:** There were literally hundreds of contraband camps around the country. As the self-emancipated came to cities that were now under the control of the Union, people didn't know what to do with them, and they put them in these camps. What you have is a place that is both ripe with hope and optimism, but also ripe with disease, death, and frustration.

**Harriet Jacobs, v/o:** *I found men, women, and children all huddled together without any regard to age or sex. Some of them were in the most pitiable condition.// Amid all this sadness, we sometimes would hear a shout of joy. Some mother had come in and found her long-lost child; some husband his wife.*

**Edna Greene Medford:** I have no doubt Lincoln is very much influenced by the contraband that he sees in Washington on a daily basis. When he's coming from the Soldiers' Home to the White House, he's passing down Seventh Street and he's passing one of those contraband camps and they are greeting him as he goes by.

**Lonnie Bunch:** And there are many stories of Lincoln stopping to talk, learning about what it was like to be a Black woman who was enslaved. So in some ways, this notion of Lincoln having a thirst to understand something he didn't experience, but having the kind of compassion to talk to people who were enslaved, I think that also began to shape him because what it does is it makes slavery real.

**Narration:** The humanity of the escapees moved Lincoln. And as their numbers grew, so did his resolve to use emancipation as a means of ending the war.

**Edward Ayers:** Part of what Lincoln sees is that we have these powerful allies in the enslaved population, who can be spies, who can tell us exactly which road to follow when we're mobilizing, who can help our own troops. And by aiding us, you're hurting the enemy. So Lincoln sees this, you know, these words, these reports come up to Washington and he begins to realize that perhaps the way to do what he took office to do, which is to save the United States, goes through ending slavery, not around ending slavery.

**Kellie Carter Jackson:** So in order to bring the country together, again, he has to have emancipation. And this is how emancipation becomes not just a military necessity, but a political necessity.

## Lincoln and the Republican Party Interview Thread Transcript

### Chris Bonner

The Republican Party was a paragon, I think in some ways, of this kind of moderate anti-slavery. Their concern was preventing the spread of slavery, the expansion of slavery into territories where it didn't exist. And their concern was really the ideology of free labor, the concept that free working men were the best, were the ideal citizens for the United States. And so Lincoln comes to be a sort of major figure, a major advocate for that free labor vision and for the Republican Party's brand of moderate anti-slavery because he's really conscious of finding the balance between pro-slavery, like a radical pro-slavery position, and a radical abolitionist position. He cultivates this idea of a future in which people are able to live freely in the North and continue to own slaves in the South if that's what they choose to do.

He cultivates this position in part because it's his conviction that that's what's legally required under the Constitution. There is no power in the federal government to end slavery where it already exists. And so what can be done is to try to ensure that states and new territories can limit the spread of slavery into new spaces. And so he strikes this really, I think really careful, moderate balance that makes it possible for him to come to prominence within the Republican Party.

### Southern white response to Lincoln and the Republicans

The fears of white Southerners were represented in a lot of ways in the calling, or the naming of Lincoln and others as "Black Republicans," and this was a consciously racist claim. The fear that white Southerners were playing on was that the Republican Party was not anti-slavery as they said, but they were abolitionists, that they wanted the immediate end of slavery. And with that, or alongside the end of slavery, what white Southerners said was that Republicans and Lincoln wanted what was often called amalgamation. They wanted social equality, they wanted Black and white people to share the same spaces, to marry, to have sexual relationships, whatever that might entail. And so there's this anxiety that white Southerners were playing on that was trying to convince voters across the country that Lincoln and the Republicans wanted to eradicate the racial order. And Lincoln was insisting that his project was, again, to limit slavery where it existed, but white Southerners were trying to cultivate this image of Lincoln as not only an abolitionist, but what they would have called an amalgamationist.

One of the things that seems most important to me about Lincoln and really about the Republican Party of

Lincoln was this investment in the idea that a government should look out for vulnerable people. There is a way to think about Lincoln as just, like, freeing the slaves or to think about the Civil War as creating emancipation. But what really happens, and I think is fascinating in the Civil War era, is that the government and individuals together create this robust relationship between Black people and federal authorities. Black people are able to make their concerns heard, and federal government officials are listening to those concerns. And I think that the policy of, or the process of emancipation really reflects this relationship. Enslaved people run to the Union lines and say, "We want to be free." Generals like Benjamin Butler take in enslaved people and say, "They're 'contraband.' They can not be returned to our enemies."

Building on that, Congress enacts the confiscation acts, which say that the Union military cannot be used to return enslaved people to slave owners. Building on that, Lincoln enacts the Emancipation Proclamation. And so there's this combination of the efforts of federal lawmakers to listen to and respond to Black people's concerns and Black people making those concerns heard. The policies of emancipation, the greatest policies of Lincoln's presidency worked because the president was hearing the needs of people in need and responding to those needs. And so I think that it's really, really important that we see that the Civil War and emancipation worked because people in power cared about people who didn't have it.

### Edward Ayers

So Lincoln is not an abolitionist because he does not think that what the abolitionists are calling for – which is the immediate beginning of the end of slavery – is sanctioned by the Constitution. That's why William Lloyd Garrison, leading abolitionist, calls the Constitution "a pact with the devil." Lincoln, because he reveres the Constitution, the Declaration of the United States, says "As much as I hate slavery, we cannot end it right now. What we can do is stop its spread so that it turns in upon itself. And so that as in the days, when the Constitution was written, when it looked as if slavery was going to disappear, because its markets had been destroyed because the land had been worn out, slavery will consume the South. It will consume that land. And so we would do better to end slavery by not acting rashly against it." So he would not have called himself an abolitionist because by this time the abolitionists had a very specific goal, which is the abolition of slavery where it was. Now, this of course, leaves Lincoln open to charges of being soft on

slavery. But from his point of view, "I'm being realistic. I'm doing what I can to stop it."

Lincoln makes two mistakes that we might think of in this regard. One, he overestimates white Southerners who do not own slaves. He's heard them. He's heard Henry Clay, his big hero, a slaveholder from Kentucky, extol the Union. He cannot believe that white Southerners don't love the United States enough to defend it when push comes to shove, when they have no explicit economic interest in defending slavery. So he believes longer than he might have that there's going to be an upsurge of support for the United States among nonslaveholding white Southerners. And even some slaveholding white Southerners, many of whom have been professed unionists only months before. So that's a miscalculation. He can't be blamed for that. He has too much faith in the people that his own origins trace to. He has origins in the white South and he believes that they believe what they have said before that they love the United States. You see, the United States military is dominated by Southerners who are fighting for the United States, are building their careers. People like Robert E. Lee are devoted to protecting the United States. He thinks that they will come to their senses, when push comes to shove, that they will choose the United States.

The other miscalculation he might make, which was common among Republicans is how strong slavery was in 1860. I find that people of lots of different political persuasions believe that slavery would have faded away had there not been the Civil War. But the fact is that slavery had never been stronger than it was in 1860. Its profits had never been greater. Its prices of enslaved people had never been higher. The problem was that precisely because it was so profitable, it was becoming concentrated in fewer and fewer hands. So the South was becoming ever more an oligarchy of white people. So those three fourths of white Southerners calculate this and they think, "Well, how are we ever going to have a future in this slave society? Only by being able to move to new cheap land, where we might be able to get a start."

So by underestimating how vital slavery was. And as you would see in Richmond, adapting to industrialization, into new kinds of crops and by overestimating white Southerners' loyalty to the Union, Lincoln thinks that the Republican plan of constraining slavery, having it slowly die, a strong impulse rise, that's what he envisions. But both those things fail.

## Edward Ayers

Lincoln is a humane man, but he's not free from the racial prejudices of his time. He does not know what enslaved people will do in the moment of war. White Southerners say, "We know what they're going to do. They're going to protect us. They're going to stay here. They're going to be loyal to us." Of course, that becomes the story that they tell themselves for the next 150 years, right? Is that when

push comes to shove, they helped hide the silver. They stayed here with their loyal masters. That's what the white South believes. Lincoln doesn't think that's going to be the case because we have seen Black abolitionists come to the North – like Frederick Douglass – how articulate and powerful and determined they are.

He's seen thousands of people escaping through the Underground Railroad every year. People risking their lives to become free. He knows about Harriet Tubman. So he knows that those kinds of people exist. What's the proportion? Is the enslaved population of the Confederacy going to be of a greater assistance to the enemies of the United States, or could it be turned to advantage? And what Lincoln comes to realize is that the needs of the enslaved people and the needs of the United States Army are aligned. What do enslaved people want? They want an ally for the first times in their lives to have a place to go that is not dominated by slavery and to have a place perhaps where they would be able to get food and have a place where they were able to get clothing and have their children taken care of. What's the United States Army need? The United States Army needs information. It needs support. It needs labor, but it mainly needs to weaken the Confederacy. So in order to aid enslaved people, they are directly striking a blow at the material needs of the Confederacy, but also at the psychological needs of the Confederacy.

The Confederacy needs to believe that they are not fighting a war against the interest of enslaved people. But as they tell themselves, as impossible as this seems to us today, to protect enslaved people. What they tell them all the time is "The Yankees are not your friends. They are just using you. They will put you back in slavery somewhere else. Why not stay here? You've known us your whole life. We grew up together. We'd nursed you when you were sick, we provide you clothing. You'd want to stay with us. What do you think the Yankees are going to do? Why would the Yankees want you to be there?" Right? And so the argument that enslaved people had to make to the United States when they got there is that we're on your side. Where allies were invaluable. And by aiding us, you're hurting the enemy.

So Lincoln sees this, these words, these reports come up to Washington and he begins to realize that perhaps the way to do what he took office to do, which is to save the United States, goes through ending slavery, not around ending slavery. Now, what we need to understand is that Lincoln is up against a lot of people who disagree with that, including the Democrats who see this as a complete violation of what they signed up to fight for, which is to save the United States.

So here's how their argument goes: "So you're telling me, Mr. Lincoln, that you've drafted my sons to go down there in Virginia or Tennessee to fight. And you're going to prolong the war by expanding its purpose to end slavery? I believe you're acting in an unconstitutional way, no matter what you say, I believe this has been your

purpose all along. I believe the 'Black Republicans' have been abolitionists in disguise. I believe you're listening too much to people like Frederick Douglass and Thaddeus Stevens. Other people whispering in your ears that this is a chance to ennoble yourself. And here's what I want: I want this war to end and I want it to end as soon as possible. And I want my boys to come home and I want taxes to stop rising through the roof. Okay? And I want you to stop aggrandizing power. You are acting in a way that the founders did not envision, which is a tyrannical president absorbing all this authority to do things like declaring the Emancipation Proclamation." So those people have power. They have weight, and he can't afford for that argument to infiltrate the Republican ranks. He needs to remember, he wins 39.6% of the vote. That's a lot of people who didn't vote for him, right? So he has to find a language. That's not the language of abolitionism, but a language of practicality. So there's a famous line that the Emancipation Proclamation has "all the moral grandeur of a bill of lading." That's on purpose. We know that Abraham Lincoln can evoke moral grandeur whenever he wants to, as he would do months later at Gettysburg. Right now, what he needs to do is show skeptics as well as supporters that there is a necessary embrace of the end of slavery to accomplish our purposes.

You might think that once the war begins that Lincoln would become radicalized. He would say all along, "I've never been radical." Maybe partly because there is a branch of his party called the Radicals, and he is not them. And they don't think he is them, right? They think they have to keep pushing him to act as boldly as he needs to. So what you find is that Lincoln at each step does what he thinks is necessary to try to stop the rebellion, right? And so I'd say he has one foot on the accelerator, one foot on the brake at all times, he's going to do what's necessary, but he's also not trying to overwhelm the South. If you told anybody at the beginning of the war that the United States army is going to mobilize enough force to conquer an area the size of continental Europe, nobody, especially the white South, maybe a lot of the white North, would have thought that was possible.

So now we look back on that and know, every textbook has the graph that shows how much more stuff the United States had than the Confederacy – how many more guns and men. But what the white South had was its home field advantage. It's defending a) it's home, which mobilizes people, but it's also an incredibly large, diverse, intractable terrain. So Lincoln could not have imagined that the United States would be able to mobilize enough people to overrun all of the Confederacy. What he was trying to do is get them to a point, over and over again, where they would negotiate a peace in which they would come back into the United States, but they would accept the non-expansion of slavery. Okay. So that's his strategy for a long time, until it proves that we're not going to defeat the Confederacy unless we destroy slavery. Okay. We're not going to save the United States without destroying slavery.

So he becomes radical in that sense, in believing that there has to be a conjoining of the two great purposes of the war. One which the Democrats see as directly at odds with each other. If you want to save the United States, give the Confederate states a reason to compromise and to come back in, stop sending our boys off to die when you could compromise out of this. The Radical Republicans say, "No, we've got to seize this moment to destroy slavery forever and wholly." Lincoln is thinking, "I want to stop the war, stop this suffering. Save the United States. It's not exactly clear what the ultimate fate of slavery might be. Right? But it is clear that we cannot allow the Confederates to keep using their enslaved population against us." So that's what he decides in 1862. And that's what becomes embodied in the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863.

People look at this and say, well, he had ulterior motives. All he wanted to do is to win, well, which is if that's all I wanted, that was fine too. But it's also the case that he recognizes that getting the reports from the field, look at the enslaved people and the chances they are taking to make themselves free. Three weeks after Virginia secedes, enslaved men go to Fort Monroe, near Norfolk and declare themselves on the side of the United States. Now think about this, Virginia has had slavery for over two centuries and it begins to unravel in three weeks. And this kind of placed every fear that white South has – is that we've been lying to ourselves, that our enslaved people love us, that we are like family, that they need us. At the first moment, people are going to the first allies, they can find United States Army to make themselves free.

So part of what Lincoln sees is that we have these powerful allies in the enslaved population who can be spies, who can tell us exactly which road to follow when we're mobilizing, who can help our own troops. Plus if we take them in, they will not be digging the entrenchments around Richmond anymore, that the Confederates will not be able to use them. So on one hand, the men in the field of the United States Army come to know Black people for the first time and to realize the moral purpose that they have to recognize the strength of their religious belief, to recognize the resilience of their families, and to recognize how much they understand what the war is about. So that infiltrates the Union cause. At the same time, the Union comes to understand 4 million people put to work against their will to support the Confederacy nullifies a large part of our advantage in manpower.

So I think that we have to understand both the aspirations of enslaved people who are making their possibilities known to the United States at the same time that Lincoln's coming to understand just how powerful Southern slavery is and what it means to be able to command people to do work that you are having to make soldiers do. You got some young white guy from Massachusetts digging a trench, the Confederates are having enslaved people do that, right? So you have to understand that all along, Lincoln's calculating all of this, right? And part of this is, is that he does grow to

understand the capacities of the enslaved people at the South in every dimension, both the capacity to save the United States, but also their own capacity for freedom. We imagine that Lincoln's growing over the war. He is because people like Frederick Douglass are coming to him and explaining, "Look, the first moment they can see a glimpse of freedom, they're risking their lives to seize it." And so I think you have to understand both the upsurge of possibility, but also the growing threat of the danger of concentrated in slave labor by the Confederacy.

### **Sidney Blumenthal**

Lincoln says that when he heard of it, "We ran to the sound of the battle, carrying axes." And he had, of course been in the wilderness for years since his one term in the Congress, riding broken-down horses in the Central Illinois County Circuit with a traveling group of minstrel lawyers and judges, you know, sharing inns together and traveling from courthouse to courthouse. And he said, "I'd almost put politics out of my mind." Maybe. I don't think Lincoln ever put politics out of his mind, but suddenly he was born again. And these parties' names took on different implications. One was called the Opposition Party. One was called simply the Anti-Nebraska Party.

One party was organized out of a previous radical sect called the Republican Party. At Lincoln's great speech against the Kansas-Nebraska Act, a small group of these radicals had approached him and asked him to come to their meeting for the formation of their party. And he said he had a previous legal engagement in a distant county. And he sort of ran away from them. And in 1856, Lincoln decides he's going to join forces with them. These parties organized state by state. They're not really organized nationally, and what becomes the Republican Party. And for the organizing committee of the Republican Party of Illinois, which takes place on Washington's birthday in Decatur, Illinois in 1856, Lincoln sends a telegram to his law partner William Henry Herndon, that he will go there. And according to Herndon, says, "Radicals and all." It almost breaks up over nativism because some of them, former nativists known as Know-Nothings, resist a platform plank that is inclusive of immigrants by a German newspaper editor. And the Germans are a very important part of this new party's coalition. And they turned to Lincoln to resolve it, and Lincoln says, "The answer's in the Declaration of Independence. All men are created equal," and they accept the plank.

### **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.

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 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.

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.

As Douglass said, when Lincoln was elected, "The power of slavery is broken and slaveholders know it." No amount of disclaimers and reassurances that Lincoln could make, would ever convince slaveholders, 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.

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 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.

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."

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.

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.

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 slaveholding 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 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.

## Lincoln's Evolution on Slavery Interview Thread Transcript

### Mary Francis Berry

Lincoln was a Free Soiler. He was not an abolitionist. And he was not part of the anti-slavery movement, which wanted to abolish slavery in the South, which wanted to abolish it everywhere. I mean, the anti-slavery movement, you can date it all the way back to when the Quakers and the 18th century came out with their big mandate against man stealing, they call it that it was immoral and wrong. And all of the people who mobilized to try to help free slaves or to have them hide them, or when they came to the North and runaways and all that. People who liked John Quincy Adams after he was president ran and got elected to the House of Representatives and kept presenting resolutions to the House of Representatives to end slavery, at least in the District of Columbia. And he did that the entire time, but he was in the House of Representatives.

Lincoln was no William Lloyd Garrison. He was no William Sumner. He was none of these people. He was not an antislavery or abolitionist leader. And he certainly was not Frederick Douglass. So that I think that you, he was a Free Soiler. He believed that Blacks and so far as I can tell were human beings, although he was a great fan of Thomas Jefferson, and it was Thomas Jefferson who wrote notes on the state of Virginia, which came out in 1785, which in fact talks about Blacks being inhuman. There's a whole section there. If you never read it, it makes a terrible bedtime reading about how Blacks are emotional and how Blacks are... don't have the kind of sense that human beings have and all the rest of it. I don't think that Lincoln can by anybody's definition be considered to be an abolitionist or an anti-slavery man in the early 19th century.

Given the number of initiatives that were discussed and taken and the war itself and the behavior of the South and the responses of Lincoln and the Emancipation Proclamation and the debates and the Congress of the United States as time went on, it is clear that the abolition of slavery which was done by the actual 13th Amendment could not have happened without certain people in the Congress of the United States. Thaddeus Stevens, Charles Sumner, all those people in the Congress of the United States who were called Radical Republicans, all of those people who stood forward... Also that Lincoln began to see, he did what I call... he evolved over time. That's the best way to look at him. He was strategic and he moved that... Lincoln saw, and we can see it if we look at the Lincoln monument and read the words down below there, you can see that he's talking about slavery as being a cause of the war by that time. He hadn't talked about slavery being the cause of war. He did that gradually as

time went on and finally, in the end, he sees that it is that they seceded because of slavery – pure and simple.

He's trying to save the Union and they see that he knew that you couldn't go back. There's no way to, once you let the genie out of the bottle, so to speak, Blacks were already in the service. They were already fighting. They weren't going to go back willingly and turn around and say, "Well, okay, we'll just be slaves again," but that was not going to happen in large measure that the disruption, everything had been disrupted. And the question is, where do you go from here? And where do you go from here is you have to find something to offer to the people who have already have self-emancipated themselves or liberated themselves.

And so that abolition was not something that he would oppose. And there was no reason for him to do anything like that because after all the war had saved the Union, he was about saving the Union. He was pressed into circumstances where there was a war, secession and a war, the reality of it, and all of the people who had gotten killed and the refugees and all the horror that had taken place. So it was a reality that had taken place. And so he was very supportive of trying to do something, to acknowledge the freedom that already existed in large measure. But what was he going to do – to put everybody back on the plantations? Now, you're going to be slaves? No, you move on from that reality. And then you try to think through what else you should do. And the real 13th Amendment was the reality that the times call for.

The question of whether the Emancipation Proclamation resulted from a moral conscience on the part of Lincoln is an interesting one. But if you look at the facts and his behavior and everything that he did, and since you can't get inside his head, you can only look at what he did.

Everything he did up to the Emancipation Proclamation was done out of necessity and to save the Union. If you start all the way back with, when he told Horace Greeley, the newspaper editor in New York, that if he could save the Union without freeing any slaves he would do. So if he had to free all the slaves, you would do so – but he wanted to save the Union. He was clear about what he wanted to do. He was clear about not wanting slavery to expand out into the areas that were free soil.

He had started that when he was a congressman back in the Congress, when an amendment came up to talk about what about the territory we got from Mexico. Will there be slavery there? And he voted no, not expansionism and keep the Union as time went on. So whether he morally thought that Blacks were human, I think he did. He knew Frederick Douglass was human. He spent a lot of time with him and other Black leaders and Black people in there

as evidence that he didn't accept the notion that they were inhuman. But the idea that he did the Emancipation Proclamation for any other reason, other than what he said in the Emancipation Proclamation, which was, he was doing it out of military necessity. It may have made him feel better morally, he may have thought that morally, this makes sense. But given the manpower shortage that they had, it makes sense that he would do it for the reasons that he stated. And I have no reason to doubt him.

People who believed that we should say Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation out of a sense of morality or a moral consciousness perhaps would feel better about Lincoln and him as the great man and the great president if they could point to that and say, see, now you could argue on the other hand, supposedly Lincoln had decided not to issue the Emancipation Proclamation?

Even if there had been this manpower shortage, which was real. Suppose he said, "I don't really care if there is a manpower shortage, I'm not letting these people be free, no matter what. You have to lose, or we'll have to figure out some way to round them and make them fight or something, whatever it is. But I'm not going to do that." While he could have done it, but given the reality that he was commander in chief and was president and wanted to save the Union and the Union was about to get defeated in his view, if something didn't happen, it makes sense that as a practical man, and he was practical, that he would do this.

And I do not think it diminishes Lincoln at all to say that he saw the practicality of the Emancipation Proclamation and to frame it the way he did and that he didn't say a whole bunch of things about how sorry I am these people are slaves and I should do whatever – the act stands for itself as something that made sense that he did. And I think it adds to his reputation rather than diminishes.

### **Eric Foner**

Lincoln, on the one hand, in the early part of the war, geared policy toward the border states. On the other hand, very early in the fall of 1861, he approached Delaware to begin with – a state with only 1,800 slaves – with a plan for gradual emancipation. And he felt that if the border... His idea was if the border states voluntarily agreed to adopt a plan of emancipation, this would convince the Confederacy that those states were never going to join up, never going to secede, and that maybe it would lead other Confederate states to say, "Well, you know, we're not going to get the border states on our side, so we better maybe try to get a negotiated settlement or figure out how to go back into the Union." And Lincoln hoped that his plan for the border states would also be adopted by maybe one or more Confederate states.

What was this plan? It was a plan that Lincoln had talked about a lot before the Civil War, that he fundamentally borrowed from Henry Clay, his idol, his political idol, the

man he respected in politics more than anyone else. It was for gradual emancipation, not immediate. It might take 20, 30, 40 years. Many of the Northern states had abolished slavery through gradual emancipation decades before, Pennsylvania, New York. That is, they adopted laws that said, "Well, anybody born a slave after X date is going to become free at some age." But that didn't free any slave who was alive right now, right? So it would be a fairly long process. It would be less disruptive to the economy, Lincoln thought.

Second of all, there would be monetary compensation. The federal government would pay owners for the loss of their property in slaves. Slavery was established by state law. It was immoral, but it was a legitimate legal status. It was recognized by the Constitution. And Lincoln felt that this would be another inducement. If they could get payment for their slaves, they would more... the owners in these border states would be more willing to voluntarily agree to this plan.

And third, of course, was colonization. That is to say that the government would encourage, not require, but strongly encourage the emancipated slaves to leave the United States, whether for Africa or Central America, which Lincoln was very interested in, or the Caribbean somewhere. The government would finance this. The government would assist people to leave. And why? Why should they leave? Well, that's a complicated question, but I think in this context, the reason is that the owners in these border states would not accept a plan that would lead to a giant new free Black community being created in their states.

This was always the question, when you talked about abolishing slavery: Well, what is going to happen to these emancipated slaves? Are they going to remain in the United States? Are they going to be citizens? What kind of rights are they going to have, if any? Colonization allowed you, I think Lincoln felt, to have an end run around that question. You don't have to worry about the status of the former slaves if somehow you can convince people they're all going to be sent out of the country.

So that was Lincoln's plan, so to speak. One of the key points here is that this was a plan that required the cooperation of slave owners. You couldn't emancipate the slaves or free slaves without the cooperation of slave owners at this point in the war. So Lincoln, the inducements, and the inducements were gradualism, monetary compensation, and colonization. Of course, the border states said, "No, we are not interested in your plan." None of them adopted this plan, even Delaware. And you know, it basically didn't go anywhere, even though Lincoln promoted it for a year. All the way down to December 1862 in his State of the Union address or annual message to Congress, he promoted one version or another of this plan. He called on Congress to appropriate money, but it never got anywhere off the ground.

## Lincoln's thoughts on colonization

The fact that Lincoln promoted this idea of colonization for about 10 years, from the early 1850s until the end of 1862 really, doesn't fit with a lot of people's image of Lincoln. Let's just put it that way. The Great Emancipator. When you read his statements on colonization, people can find it very jarring, but I think you have to take Lincoln at his word. I honestly think Lincoln did believe in this plan.

The thing about colonization is, it is part of a plan for getting rid of slavery. It's part of a plan that assumes that you cannot get rid of slavery unless you get cooperation from slave owners. Colonization is part of the...you know, one of the ways of convincing slave owners that they can see the end of slavery, they can see slavery abolished. The fact is that the vast majority of them, and indeed of white people in the North too, did not want a large new free Black population to be created. And certainly, in those states where Blacks were 30, 40, 50, 60% of the population in the South, emancipating the slaves and leaving them in place would completely change the body politic and the, you know, social structure of those states.

Now, basically, Lincoln got this from Henry Clay, his political idol, who for years and years in Kentucky had been promoting a plan, this plan of emancipation, with no success whatsoever, which Lincoln surely must have realized. But this was... You know, there were times in the 1850s where Lincoln said, you know, "I really have no idea what to do about slavery. I can't see how we're going to end slavery."

In his famous Peoria speech, he starts by saying, "If I had all the power in the world, I wouldn't know what to do. My first impulse," he said, "would be to send them to Africa, their native land. But I would immediately realize that that is impossible. It's impractical. You have millions of Black people here. To ship them all to Africa is impossible. But what?" he said. "Free them and make them our equals? No. A white society would not accept that."

Lincoln is always very cagey on this. He says, "I wouldn't accept that. And even if I would, the majority of the white population would not accept a large new free Black population as equal members of the society. Colonization is the..." In other words, it's racism itself that is Lincoln's argument for colonization.

It's not that Black people are dangerous. Henry Clay used to say, "They're criminals. They're dangerous. If you free them, they're just going to run amok and create havoc." Lincoln never said anything like that. What he fundamentally said is, "Black people are entitled to the rights laid out in the Declaration of Independence: life, liberty, pursuit of happiness. And yet they cannot enjoy them in the United States because of the depth of racism here. They need to be somewhere else where they can really enjoy freedom properly." I'm not trying to defend what Lincoln said. I think it's obviously completely reprehensible to consider that these millions of people

should just be expelled from the land of their birth. And when Lincoln says "back to Africa, their native land," that's not their native land any more. The vast majority of the Black people have been born in the United States. They have no more connection to Africa than Lincoln did to England, where his ancestors came from.

So Lincoln, at this point, couldn't actually conceive of American society as a biracial society of equals. Later on, he moves in that direction. But at this point, all these factors play into Lincoln and his embrace of colonization. Did he really believe it? Yes. You have to assume he believed it. Lincoln didn't just talk about it in speeches. He was a member, he was a manager of the Illinois Colonization Society, which was one of the many groups in the United States trying to promote this idea. Lincoln didn't have to join that group. You could be elected to public office without being a member of the Colonization Society.

But, you know, as I say, I think you have to take Lincoln at his word, both early on in the 1850s where he talks about this, during the first two years of the Civil War where he talks about it, but then you have to add in that he then drops it. With the Emancipation Proclamation, Lincoln moves in a different direction on slavery, a direction in which colonization is no longer part of the plan he's putting forward.

## Eric Foner

Fugitive slaves, Lincoln, you know, early on in the 1855 in a famous letter to his friend, Joshua Speed said, you know, "I hate to see them tracked down, but I bite my lip and keep silent," because that is in the Constitution, the return of fugitive slaves. It's one of the things that's holding the country together, so to speak. But I think more important than fugitive slaves during the Civil War is just Lincoln's encounters with significant, intelligent, you know, articulate African Americans. Lincoln didn't know very many Black people before the Civil War. There weren't a heck of a lot of them in Springfield. He had some contact with some; there was a barber who he befriended and who he helped with his taxes and stuff like that. There were Black women who worked in their home, in the Lincolns' home, and he knew about people like Frederick Douglass, but he never met Black abolitionists. He never met the Black churchmen, really. It's during the Civil War that they visit him in the White House. He's the first president who has significant numbers of Black people actually coming to the White House, not as slaves, but as citizens, to talk to the president like any other American has the right to do.

And I think meeting with them, everyone knows he met with Frederick Douglass a couple of times, but you know, Martin Delaney, a group of Black churchmen, a whole series of significant African American men. And, you know, Lincoln is impressed by them. These are impressive people. And I think whatever racial prejudices he had

before the war begin to soften because of his encounter with these very impressive African American people. It's a sign of his openness, and open-mindedness, that he's willing to rethink whatever prejudices he may have grown up with.

### Chris Bonner

In the time before Lincoln sort of takes the oath of office the first time, there's a lot of sort of polarizing sentiment in the country about Lincoln. In the South, Lincoln is a figure of terror. Again and again, in the late 1850s and in the early 1860s, Lincoln said that he had no interest in trying to change or eliminate slavery in the places where it already exists. Essentially, he said, "I don't want to touch slavery in the South." One of the things he said, though, was that he hoped that the nation could put slavery on a path to "ultimate extinction." And that phrase really stuck with white Southerners. It was a phrase that to them reflected the idea that they're sort of defining a central social and economic institution was wrong and should end eventually. So part of the context of Lincoln's sort of arrival to the presidency is that he arrives and takes the oath of office over a nation that is broken. Seven states have seceded by the time Lincoln takes office. And this was a preemptive strike on the part of white Southerners. It was a response to their, I think, really irrational fear that Lincoln was dangerous to them.

So before Lincoln is able to even do anything as president, Southerners led by South Carolina have decided to leave the Union. There's an irony to the fact of secession. Lincoln said he didn't want to touch slavery in the South. He also said he didn't think he had the power to touch slavery in the South. The irony is that by seceding from the Union and by going to war, white Southerners allowed Lincoln to exercise his power as commander in chief in time of war to enact policies like the Emancipation Proclamation. And so secession in a way created the context for wartime emancipation. And so it's funny as somebody who thinks the Confederates were not the wisest of political actors.

One of the things that I think is interesting is that at the same time that, at the same time that, and precisely because white Southerners were so anxious about Lincoln's presidency, I think that we can envision enslaved people in the South being excited about the possibilities of a Lincoln presidency. We know that there were really robust networks of information and rumor and ideas being spread among enslaved people in the South. We know that, or I think it's pretty easy to envision a slave owner angrily denouncing Lincoln, and you know, the "Black Republicans," angrily denouncing the possibility of abolition under a Lincoln presidency, and being overheard by an enslaved person who then goes and tells their friends and family and neighbors about this guy, Lincoln, who seems to be the enemy of their owner. And so I think

it makes sense that at the same time that slave owners in the South were really worried and talking anxiously about Lincoln, that enslaved people might come to see him as a potential ally, as a person who they could work alongside to try to make their freedom, to realize their dreams of freedom.

In the early stages of the Civil War, Lincoln was what might be called a racial pessimist. He didn't believe that Black and white Americans could co-exist in freedom in the United States. And so as the war is progressing and at the same time that he is contemplating the policy of emancipation, he invites a group of Black men who were sort of understood as community leaders, to the White House, and essentially tries to persuade them to persuade other Black people to leave the United States. Lincoln said, among other things, to these guys, "But for your race among us, we would not have a war." Essentially what he says is that the problems of the nation are problems of the presence of Black people in that nation.

So it's this really stunning moment when Lincoln revealed that he was governing, in 1861 and 1862, from a perspective of a person who doesn't believe that Black people can really fully belong in the United States. And Black Americans were opposed to colonization, opposed to the idea that they should be forced or urged to leave the United States. They had been for decades. The United States was their native country. And so the Black folks that Lincoln spoke to in 1862 don't really, you know, convince that many people that they should leave the country. Lincoln eventually sort of abandons... He doesn't, like, renounce the idea of colonization, but he does sort of stop talking about it publicly. But I think what's really striking is the shift from Lincoln in 1862 saying, "You know what? I think African Americans should leave the United States," to one of Lincoln's last public speeches in 1865 where he says, "We should really consider ensuring that Black men and especially Black soldiers should be able to vote."

I think that there's a clear evolution of Lincoln's perspective, of Lincoln's feelings from a person who in 1862 doesn't think African Americans belong in the country, to in 1865 wanting to ensure the possibility that African American men can not only belong, but really participate in the governing of the United States. It's a fascinating transformation for him.

Lincoln was and said repeatedly that he was deeply invested in the idea that slavery was wrong. So repeatedly he said that he had this wish that all men everywhere might be free. But I think that it's important to think about how he phrased that and how he sort of conceptualized it, right? He said he hoped that all men might be free or that everyone could be free. But I think that he was anti-slavery, but not at all an abolitionist. And he was very clear about that, that he didn't believe that the federal government had any power to attack or eliminate slavery in places where it already existed. And that he didn't

really have a strong desire to actively work to end slavery where it already existed. I think that he was very clear, especially in the run-up to his election in 1860, very clear that he believed slavery was wrong, but that he did not believe that he, as president, would have the power to end slavery where it existed.

And so I think of Lincoln as an anti-slavery moderate. He fit into this broader trend across the Northern states of people who were opposed to the expansion of slavery. People who didn't want more territories in the West and potentially even in the North to be – or to become – slaveholding states. And so I think that Lincoln was... He was... he was a restrictionist. He believed that slavery should not continue to grow. He believed that slavery was wrong, but he did not want to do the work to actively end slavery until the events of the Civil War sort of brought him to the point of making that choice.

In the summer of 1864, Lincoln and Douglass meet, and Lincoln is really worried about where he stands, and his stakes, or his chances, in the election of 1864. He's concerned that he'll lose the election and that if he does, that all the work that he's been doing for wartime emancipation, that that might be rolled back, or that it might be ended. And so, he talks with Douglass and does what I think is a strange thing, which is to ask Douglass to help him figure out ways to get more enslaved people to run to the Union Army and to seek freedom with the military. He wants to try to free as many people as he can if his time in office is going to run out.

This is important. I think it's a reflection of how deeply invested Lincoln is in trying to help enslaved people get free. It's a real marker of how important that is to him. What's weird about it to me, though, and what's strange about it, is that Black folks have been finding their own way to the Union military since the beginning of the war. Since the spring of 1861, African Americans have known how to get there. And of course, they could use help, they could use more Union troops, you know like, out in the field looking for enslaved people, but it's not as though African Americans hadn't been doing this work on their own.

And so it's kind of... it's sort of asking a question that already has an answer. Just continue to send soldiers out, continue to enact policies that will ensure that these African Americans will actually be free when they make it to the Union lines. Doing those things would have enhanced the work that African Americans had already been doing. And so, Lincoln's asking this question in a way that suggests that he's almost uninformed about what African Americans have been doing to this point.

Part of what Douglass does and says about this is that this revealed to him how deeply invested Lincoln was in emancipation as a policy, that it showed Douglass Lincoln's conviction, Lincoln's serious desire to help African Americans become free. And I think that's a big

transformation for Douglass who earlier in their meetings had said, "Well, Lincoln seems to be free of the prejudice that hinders so many other White Americans," but now he's seeing that Lincoln is a person who was really wanting to do work to help to fight slavery. And so, it's a change in Douglass' sense of who Lincoln was, and I think it's a change in who Lincoln was.

One of the challenges I think of reading Douglass' perceptions of Lincoln is that a lot of what Douglass wrote about Lincoln came from much later, and so he's looking back in the 1870s and 1880s on this person that he was interacting with in the 1860s. And he's looking back fondly because Lincoln was a really significant figure for Black Americans.

One of the things that I think is really interesting about this relationship is that there's a lot of ways in which Lincoln's evolution was exactly what Frederick Douglass was envisioning and calling for in terms of his sort of addresses toward white Americans. So, early in the war Douglass is writing a lot and directly criticizing Lincoln for his reluctance to enlist Black men for his resistance to emancipation as a policy. But more broadly, I think like, when Douglass is saying, "Let Black men serve, and they will prove that they are entitled to equality, that they are deserving of citizenship," and then in 1865, when Lincoln says, "Maybe Black soldiers should have the right to vote," that is like the culmination of Douglass' ideal of what Black military service could be. This person, President Lincoln, who in 1862 thought that African Americans couldn't even really belong in the United States is, in 1865, saying Black men, Black soldiers should have the right to vote. That is exactly what Douglass hoped would happen when Black men served in the war.

And so, I think this is part of their relationship, is the way that Lincoln's evolution was a reflection of, and a response to, the advocacy of people like Douglass and the actions of Black soldiers in the war.

### **Justene Hill Edwards**

Lincoln's ideas about slavery and about race did evolve over his lifetime. He was born in Kentucky, spent most of his early years in Illinois, and he grew up, of course, knowing about slavery, perhaps being in the company of free Blacks, especially in Illinois. But he was in no way an abolitionist. He was not a supporter of completely ending slavery. If anything, we can say that he had anti-slavery sentiments, meaning that he opposed the spread of slavery, perhaps for political reasons. But he was not, for most of his life, of completely abolishing slavery.

His ideas about the equality of Black people, again, really evolved, especially after the Emancipation Proclamation. I think it is important, and we should not underestimate the fact that he did request a private meeting with Frederick Douglass, who in the 1860s, was the most prominent American abolitionist. And so even though he

was not a supporter of complete racial equality, I think we can say that his ideas about race and equality certainly evolved throughout the war.

Let's not forget that Lincoln was a politician, first and foremost, and his goal, especially during the war, was to bring the Confederacy back into the Union fold. And this question of slavery was such a hot button issue, even before his presidency, that Lincoln had a very clear sense of the stakes, of coming out in support of abolishing slavery versus taking a more moderate approach.

Now, that perspective changed with the Emancipation Proclamation. It was a really important political move, but it's also important to remember, it was a military move, it was a military strategy to shift the momentum of the war in favor of the Union. And so even though we might be able to read some kind of moral meaning behind it, by and large, it was a political, but most importantly, it was a military move more than anything else.

### **Michael Burlingame**

Lincoln was quite moved, of course, by the deaths of so many Union soldiers, it was a terrible burden on his conscience if he was responsible, and in the wake of some of these horrific defeats like Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville, Lincoln was deeply depressed because these deaths weighed heavily on his own conscience. And during the summer months, when he was president, he would live in something called the Soldier's Home, which was about three miles from the White House. And it was elevated, it was on a hill and it was cooler than the temperature would be in the White House, but it was also near a bunch of Union graves and near a hospital. So he would see, going back and forth to work and his commute as it were, graves, wounded soldiers, and the like, and they weighed extremely heavily on his conscience.

And as time went by, Lincoln was puzzled. Why this bloodshed was so extensive? Why so many people were being killed on both sides? Why so many widows and orphans were being created? And as the casualties mounted, Lincoln, I think, became more and more reflective of what was all this about. What was the meaning of this war? And I think as he reflected on it, he came to think that this might be, conceivably, could be something that had meaning, that there was some significance in this large loss of life above and beyond just the obvious concerns. And that out of this would come something truly monumental and important. And it wasn't just the preservation of the Union. It wasn't just the vindication of the idea of democracy. It also had to do with the issue that he had cared so deeply about, which was the abolition of slavery, and that somehow, this war, which would lead to the abolition of slavery, which in 1862, he does announce, but that the stakes involved, involved liberation of the slaves, as well as the preservation of the Union and the vindication of democracy.

And that the extent of the death was somehow related to the extent of the crime, that there was some kind of moral equivalence in white people suffering in this terrible war in a way that was commensurate with the suffering that Black people had endured for 250 years as slaves in the United States.

So Lincoln's embrace of emancipation, which he announces to the public in September of 1862, and then embodies in law by a proclamation on January 1st, 1863, the Emancipation Proclamation, is something that Lincoln may well have done much earlier if his own personal wishes had been what he had to consult, because he hated and loathed and despised slavery from the time he was young.

### **Steven Hahn**

When the enslaved people, who made up about 80% of the Black soldiers in the Union Army, at least people who had begun the war in a status of enslavement... It was a very precarious situation. To begin with, African Americans had been excluded from the United States Army and from the state militias, from the founding of the Republic. They were excluded on racial grounds and they were excluded because military service was seen as the basis of citizenship and white Americans did not want Black people to be in a position to make those claims. But one of the great problems was not only the experience of racism in the Union Army, because among other things, they were paid less than one half of what white soldiers were paid. But because of the response of the Confederate rebels, military service, Black soldiers were regarded as slaves in rebellion. Therefore they were subject either to execution or they were subject to re-enslavement. And therefore the stakes for African Americans who served in the Union Army was even more profound than was true for any other soldiers. Even so, they fought with a great ferocity. They fought in ways that enabled the Union Army, that was facing a manpower problem in 1863, to keep its forces in the field and to keep the enormous pressure on the Confederate rebels. So, in many ways, Black soldiers who faced daunting prospects turn the military tide of the war as they did the political tide of the war.

There's no question that Lincoln recognized not only what Black manpower did and what Black courage did because he was... Lincoln was a hands-on commander. I mean, he was watching all the time. I mean, obviously given the limitations of communication compared to what we have, it was slower and he was frustrated, but he knew what was going on. And he recognized who was carrying out his wishes, which was to force the unconditional surrender of the Confederates rather than an armistice, or trying to not inflict that kind of damage. And so he wanted to see those who were pushing in that direction. And it was clear to him that this is actually that this was exactly how

Black troops understood the meaning of the war: that it had to be fought to the end, it had to be fought to end slavery, because they knew as well as anyone that history can move backwards and that they had to make sure that history moved forward.

And precisely for that reason, I think, when he fashioned his first reconstruction plan, he did it really with a view to end the war as fast as possible. And it's clear he was not taking full account of the Black contribution to how the war would turn out. But certainly after that, in the last months and year of his presidency, it was clear that he was beginning to recognize that African Americans had acted in a way that really changed what the war was going to be about and whether the war could be won. And I think that's why he began to contemplate extending political rights, at least in a limited way. Now, obviously we have no idea what would have happened once the war was over and how he was going to supervise the reconstruction that was already underway. But it certainly suggests an openness that Andrew Johnson did not have, to the possibility of African Americans being part of the body politic of the United States.

I think he felt the debt to African Americans. He recognized the role that they had played. Certainly he had a special relationship with Frederick Douglass, who he admired and listened to, even if he didn't always agree or respond in ways that Douglass would have liked, but Douglass made an impact. It was there. And so I think that he recognized the debt. I don't think he had really developed a way of understanding or devising a way to repay that debt beyond the end of slavery. No. When slavery ended in the United States, it didn't end gradually. I mean, it ended very forcefully, dramatically in one sweep. There was no compensation to the owners, and they were counting on it and they continued to count on it once the war ended. So I think he saw that as part of his deed. When he thought he was going to lose the election of 1864, he was focused on trying to negotiate so that he could make sure that what had been done to overturn slavery wouldn't be rolled back.

So I think there's no question that he was increasing... I mean, he was absolutely committed, once the Emancipation Proclamation came down, to devoting what happened during the war to ending slavery. It had to be ended. And that was part of his first reconstruction plan. If you wanted to be readmitted to the Union, you had to rewrite your constitution and eliminate slavery. That was the sine qua non. After that, I don't think he had developed a plan. I don't think he had envisioned a pathway out. You can make an argument in any one of a number of directions that he was headed that way, or that he had actually reached the limits of what he was prepared to do. And it raises interesting questions about what would have happened if he had not been assassinated. And I know when I'm asked that question, "What would the story be like if Lincoln had lived?" My response is always, "We really don't know, but I feel quite confident that we would think less of him."

## Abolitionist Movement Interview Thread Transcript

### Chris Bonner

Radical abolitionism really begins to flourish in the 1830s. And the... one of the sort of leading figures in this movement is William Lloyd Garrison, who publishes a newspaper called *The Liberator*, which essentially says, "Slavery must end now, there is no compromise with slavery with slave owners. The institution is evil and we have to free ourselves from it as a nation." And this sort of doctrine flourishes through a combination of like high philosophical arguments in the writings of people like Garrison and more concrete and vivid stories of slavery that are coming from the pens and from the lives of fugitive slaves and writers of slave narratives. People like Frederick Douglass, people like Solomon Northup, people like Charles Ball, who are able to offer really vivid stories of what it was like to live amidst the horrors of slavery. More and more, these kinds of ideas are being broadcast about slavery's injustice.

Abraham Lincoln comes into this context of anti-slavery from the fringes. He was a person who was, really throughout his early political career, conscious of distancing himself from radical abolitionists. He was conscious of saying that I am not a person who wants to eradicate slavery everywhere, or who feels like it needs to be eliminated everywhere. What Lincoln's philosophy was is that slavery was problematic to the freedom of white Northerners; that the expansion of slavery was threatening to an ideal of agrarian freedom for, you know, small farming folks like his family in Illinois. And so Lincoln's whole philosophy is that we should restrict slavery, we should try to keep it confined to the places where it exists, we should try to find ways to make sure that it doesn't continue to expand into the new territory.

And so there's a complexity to anti-slavery in the North, and I think it's also really important to distinguish between anti-slavery, which was Lincoln's sort of opposition to the spread of the institution and abolitionism, which was the philosophy of someone like William Lloyd Garrison or Frederick Douglass, that slavery is evil and must end. Anti-slavery is the broad umbrella of opposition to the institution. But there's a difference between that and the concrete work that people were doing to try to eradicate it everywhere.

Maybe the most famous abolitionist in American history is William Lloyd Garrison, who was a foundation of this immediatist abolitionist movement. The idea that slavery must be ended as soon as possible, that it was a fire, that it had to be put out. What people might not know or think about when they think about Garrison is that Garrison was radicalized in a lot of ways by talking to Black people, talking to fugitive slaves who told him how horrific slavery

was. And that made Garrison into a person who said slavery is an urgent problem.

What they also might not know is that Garrison, and this sort of vehicle for radical abolitionism, his newspaper, *The Liberator*. *The Liberator* was supported financially, it was upheld, by Black people. Most of Garrison's earliest subscribers were African Americans. And so it's impossible to really understand, or to really know, the abolitionist movement as it was promoted by white Americans, without understanding how important Black people, enslaved people, fugitive slaves, Black abolitionists were to making the abolitionist movement as radical, and as vocal and as impassioned as it was.

I think there was always a kind of tension in terms of the relations between Black and white abolitionists. There was a feeling among many white abolitionists that they were capable of and they had the ability to do the really intense, theoretical thinking and theoretical sort of argumentation about why slavery was unjust and that, you know, people like William Lloyd Garrison would offer the thought for abolitionism, and people like Frederick Douglass, Garrison would say, could tell the story. They could provide firsthand evidence of what was horrific about slavery.

There was an idea that white abolitionists could appeal to people's minds while Black abolitionists would have to appeal to people's hearts. And there is some merit to this perception, right? There's something distinctive about the kind of emotional appeal that someone like Frederick Douglass could make based on his own experiences of bondage. But it's also really unfair and ultimately we know quite untrue to think that someone like Douglass, because he had been enslaved, because he was Black, could only appeal to the heart, right? We know that Douglass was a really rigorous thinker about democracy and about the sort of ideological foundations of the nation and why exactly slavery was opposed to, or stood in opposition to, those foundations.

One of the other things that I think is really evident here is, is not just a sense of like what Douglass could offer as a formerly enslaved person. There's a bigger picture thing here or truth here, which is that a lot of white abolitionists were not invested in racial equality. They were not dedicated to this idea. They weren't fully convinced that someone like Douglass could do all the same things that they could do. They were not fully convinced that Black people and white people have the same abilities or capacities, or should possess the same rights, even as they were deeply dedicated to the idea that slavery was evil.

### Kate Masur

So in a lot of places, and it's a little bit surprising, I think even to a lot of historians these days, how often or how frequently enslaved people and people who were also illegally held as slaves made use of the courts to try to secure their freedom. And I think these freedom suits, the records of them are housed oftentimes in local courthouses. And some of them are still in the courthouses themselves, in county courthouses. They haven't made their way to big repositories. And so, you have to do a certain amount of detective work and be an enterprising historian to find the record of these suits. But it turns out that in many, many places in slaveholding areas, including in Missouri, in the District of Columbia, which I'm most familiar with, many African Americans went to court to sue for their freedom.

And they made all different kinds of arguments. They argued that they were illegally enslaved. At some points they argued that an ancestor of theirs, usually a woman, had been a free woman. And because of that, they should also be free because the status of the person is supposed to follow the status of the mother. They argued that their putative owner had done something illegal. There were locals and state laws that said enslaved people couldn't be transferred across certain jurisdictional lines. And if you did, let's say, move from Virginia into the District of Columbia, you would have to register your existence and your enslaved person. So people actually tracked this and they would go to court and say, my owner did not register me, so I am entitled to my freedom. So there are all kinds of different types of legal actions that people take.

And sometimes they win in court. And it's really interesting to see there are judges who, even if they're pro-slavery, even if they're slaveholders themselves, they're willing to follow the law. They're willing to look at the law and say, well yeah, by rights you should be free.

### Edna Greene Medford

The resistance movement began long before African people left the continent. Africans were resisting slave catchers and slave traders in their villages. As some boats were going up the rivers, they were attacking them, and onboard the ships during the middle passage, they are resisting as well. And of course, when they get to America, they continue to resist. We sometimes think that there were no slave revolts in the United States because we have so many of them happening in the Caribbean where Black people are vastly in the majority, and that's never the case in the United States except in a couple of states.

But we have resistance to slavery among African Americans as early as the 1600s. Certainly by 1712, we've got a revolt in New York. We've got another conspiracy in 1741 in New York. We have the Stono Revolt in 1739 in South Carolina. And of course, when we enter the national period, we have resistance to slavery through Gabriel's Revolt in 1800 in Richmond and Nat Turner's Revolt in 1831

in Southampton County, Virginia. And we have individuals who are suing for their freedom during the American Revolution and in the wake of the revolution. And so by the 1830s, when the abolitionist movement becomes better organized and societies are formed, you have Black men and women very actively involved there as well.

You've got the Garrisonians, Black people are joining that organization, the American Anti-Slavery Society. You've got African American abolitionists going to Europe and lecturing about slavery in the United States and raising funds to help the abolitionist movement. You've got Black women involved in the abolitionist movement. We spend so much time talking about Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman, as we should because these were extraordinary Black women, but there were many other Black women who were involved as well. And not just as ancillary, as peripheral, people. These are folk who are writing and actually contributing to *The Liberator*, the anti-slavery newspaper of William Lloyd Garrison. They are writing and making contributions to *The Anglo-African* in New York and *The Christian Recorder* and other Black newspapers.

They're going on the lecture circuit, both at home and abroad. They're raising funds for the cause. They're doing a variety of things. They're writing poetry, they're writing anti-slavery tracts. So women are not just sitting by the wayside, waiting for men to do the job, and that's extraordinary because this is a period where the cult of domesticity exists, where the role of women is supposed to be in the household, taking care of the children. They're not supposed to be on the lecture circuit and these Black women are out there doing that. White women are as well, but it's extraordinary for Black women because Black women certainly are not respected and they certainly aren't expected to be out there lecturing or writing. But they're doing it and they're very influential.

### Steven Hahn

When you look at the abolitionist movement and its relationship to what we call the anti-slavery movement, you learn a lot of things, and part of it is you learn what the limitations of both of those movements were. And it was a reminder of how important what enslaved people did. Abolitionists called the morality of slavery into question. They were almost always deeply religious. They had been converted in revivals of the Second Great Awakening, or they were Quakers, who by the 19th century had come to see slavery and any involvement with enslavement, whether it was a slave trade, owning slaves, or whatever, as a sin. And this, we associate with William Lloyd Garrison. But one of the things we're beginning to learn was William Lloyd Garrison was influenced by African Americans, who were way ahead of him on the slavery question, Garrison was a colonizationist.

And then he went to work on a newspaper in Baltimore and learned from African Americans. Finally, for the first time, he went from Massachusetts to a world in which

slavery not only was legal, but was centrally important in terms of the power relationships. And he learned from them about the immorality of slavery, and then goes back to Massachusetts and establishes *The Liberator* and the American Anti-Slavery Society. And Garrison's idea, and radical abolitionists, because they didn't want simply the restriction of slavery, they wanted the abolition of slavery, and they wanted the abolition of slavery because they thought it was a sin to enslave people. But what they imagined was trying to persuade people of the sinfulness of what they were doing and therefore hoping to persuade them that they needed to act, and that they needed to end their involvement with slavery.

It was called moral suasion. The problem was that most people in the states, white people in states where slavery was legal, especially those people who owned slaves, didn't have the same view of slavery's sinfulness that Garrison and other abolitionists did. From their point of view, they had been converted in revivals, too. They didn't see any problem between being a good Christian and being a slave owner. Now, this is something that Frederick Douglass, if you read his first narrative as other African Americans, who had fled slavery and got themselves involved in the anti-slavery movement, saw, is that they emphasize the contradiction between being a good Christian and owning slaves. And they saw it as the ultimate hypocrisy, but their owners didn't see it that way. And so this was going to be a problem for the abolitionist movement. I mean, you may feel very strongly about the immorality of slavery, but what do you do about it?

At this time, there were two models that could be followed. One was the model of gradualism. We're talking about the 1830s here. When Garrison begins publishing *The Liberator*, or the anti-slavery societies begin expanding, that abolitionism, it doesn't turn into a mass movement, but it turns into a movement with chapters from New England, out into the Midwest, with anti-slavery newspapers being published that oftentimes depended very heavily on African American subscribers. But the question is, now that you moved to a position of really calling for the end of slavery, I mean, white people who had questions about slavery had been colonizationists. And this idea was, as we know, that somehow or other we would couple emancipation with the removal of the free Black population. It was more of a rhetorical point than it was something that had any kind of practical implementation. But nonetheless it did suggest that the heart of that thread of the anti-slavery movement was racism, was to try to secure the United States as a country that was for white people, and not for anyone else.

But by the 1830s, if you were going to think about, well, how does slavery end? There were two models. One was the model that basically led to the gradual abolition of slavery in New England, and in the middle Atlantic, which basically said that slaves born after a certain date would be free once they reached a certain age. It really dragged out emancipation over many years. It dragged it out so slowly that most northern states had to pass emancipation laws twice because there was so much ambiguity. And that way can take a long time.

The other model was the Haitian Revolution, which was the violent overthrow of slavery. Now, by the 1850s there were more abolitionists, especially African Americans, but also people like John Brown, who began thinking that the only way to end slavery was through violence. That slavery was violent, that slavery was power that depended on violence, and that the only way you got rid of it was through violent means.

But up until, at that very point, an anti-slavery movement had really developed a mass space. And that was through, first, through a variety of third parties, like the Liberty Party and the Free Soil Party, but finally, through the Republican Party, which was not about slavery as being a sin, it was not about abolishing slavery where it existed. Because Lincoln, like other Republicans, believed that the federal government did not have the constitutional authority to abolish slavery where it was legal in the states. And so the only thing that they could do was restrict slavery from expanding into federal territories in the trans-Mississippi west. And they also embraced the idea of colonization, which Lincoln hung on to for a very long time, even through the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation. So you had an anti-slavery movement, which was about restricting slavery somehow, thinking that if slavery was restricted, eventually it would collapse from within. And you had an abolitionist movement that, rhetorically, saw a slavery as a sin and immoral, and slavery had to be abolished everywhere, but they had no plan on how you did it. So when the Civil War broke out, there was really nothing on the table, and so part of what turned it into a revolutionary situation was that because slaves acted and forced the federal government to deal with the issue, even though they didn't want to, that all of a sudden the question was, what do you do? And what sort of power the federal government had to deal with the questions that enslaved people demanded that they address.

**Mary Francis Berry**

There were a number of Black women who were deeply engaged in the anti-slavery movement, the abolitionist movement. And some became speakers on the circuit of going around to anti-slavery meetings and organizations and working with white women abolitionists and educating some of the white women about what they should be doing about this issue. All I can say is that they had to be courageous just as any woman who did this at the time had to be, because having a woman by herself, going out to all these places and showing up and being willing to speak to audiences at sometimes on the way in and out, and sometimes in the building where they were speaking, there were people who were very angry about them, even having the nerve to speak out about this. And those who were able to, were writers, wrote many things that they published essays. They wrote some of the pamphlets. Some of them wrote speeches, for the big male anti-slavery figures like Garrison, for example, even Lloyd Garrison, for example. So that they were very, very visible in this movement.

Frances Watkins Harper, who was born in Baltimore as a free woman of color became educated. She was a poet. She wrote some wonderful poetry. She also was a strong anti-slavery person, abolitionist person, and worked with the white women in the women's suffrage movement too. And she traveled around the country going to anti-slavery meetings, showing up. And in fact, she was one of the people who was best known in the 19th century as a Black woman, as a public figure. And that may surprise people who think that there was nobody except Sojourner Truth or somebody they've heard of, one or two people. But she was really the one that everybody looked to and when she was coming to town to speak, people wanted to hear her analysis of what they should be doing. And her writings are available for us to read and to look at, and she was respected by the men in the movement, by everybody who was in the movement. So I think that she's an important voice at this time.

I remember something she wrote about how people thought that since white women were working for suffrage, that they might all be like, I think she put it, like buttermilk drops – all perfect people – and that they weren't perfect and that you couldn't expect them, even if they got the vote, to do everything we would want to have done, because some of them would do the right thing and others wouldn't, just like men wouldn't. But she put it in very poetical terms, but that what we should do is stand for them having the vote anyway, because of the ones that we could get to come over to our side and do what we needed. I just thought that was wonderful.

To the extent that people who have studied history or who read about it know anything about the abolitionist movement, they would think that the people who led it were these white men, they've heard about like William Lloyd Garrison and you know, William Graham Sumner and so on. And that these were the people. Some of them may not have heard of Frederick Douglass, but if they did, they would have heard of him, but they would not have heard of the women who were involved in the movement and of some of the men who were involved in it.

But there were a lot of people in cities and towns all around the country who were had groups of who were not only involved in the Underground Railroad, which people have heard of, even if they're not quite sure what it is, that spirited slaves, who were running away and helped them. But that people who were abolitionists and who went out and spoke about it and talked about it and were not celebrated at the time. And in particular, this was true of the women.

And it is clear that many of the abolitionists themselves, the white abolitionists, would not hire the Black folks, who they were supposed to be standing for being free to work. And they certainly wouldn't deal with them socially and look down on them and didn't consider them equal and free human beings. That was one of the faults of the movement and the ones who felt that way, the abolitionists who felt that way, the white abolitionists thought that it was enough that they were saving the poor slaves, the poor fugitives, from their fate. And they had helped them to come along. It didn't mean that they had to uplift them or see to it that they were treated equally. And that was one of the things that tell us about the perpetuation of white supremacy. Even among people who are supposed to be allies and who were supposed to be doing good and who was supposed to be helpful. That's a little hard, isn't it? It's true though. It's true now and it was true then.

**Lonnie Bunch**

The story of women in the abolitionist movement, especially Black women, is little known and is unbelievably powerful. People like Frances Harper are brilliant because what they're able to do is take their own experiences and give voice to the experience of many others. Her poetry is so powerful – “bury me not in the land of the enslaved.”

For me, what you really see is that women play crucial roles in non-ascribed leadership. They're not the leaders of the anti-slavery movement, but they're essential. When you come into a city like Newark or Philadelphia, is Black

that help create these vigilance associations to give aid to the newly freed, to newly emancipated. And so I think people like Frances Harper are now being rediscovered because what they do is help us see a fuller picture of the enslaved experience, not just through the lens of the male. And I think that is really very powerful and very important.

### **Jelani Cobb**

When you talk about Black women abolitionists, first, there's the double burden of being Black and being female in a society in which both of those things were the opposite. Both of those things disqualified you from being able to be a part of the public interest, or to speak in the public square, or to weigh in on the events of the day. And that's just the kind of beginning of it. Then, often, these are women who have endured the unique burdens of enslavement that women faced. And so if you read Harriet Jacobs and her autobiography, she talks about something that is, again, one of the parts of slavery that we're least willing to confront, which is sexual exploitation and rape. And you know, her hiding in a cubby, essentially, for years, until she had her opportunity to flee to freedom, and to do that and then be willing to write about that, to tell that story as a means of indicting the system in a way that only women could have, because the various arguments that were being advanced in defense of slavery all rested upon this idea that it was this educational institution or that these were familial relationships. And she's saying right there, "What about the rape? Explain that. Explain that part of the institution of slavery." And you know, even... I think, when you look at Sojourner Truth, who was enslaved in New York State, and you know, there's a kind of gradual emancipation idea that people kind of age into emancipation in New York State. They don't have a kind of one fell swoop thing. It is a point where upon reaching, you know, 18 or 21... I'll say that one again:

It's upon reaching, you know, a designated age, this person is free. And so Sojourner Truth really had the option of living her life as it was, as opposed to risking her life in this crusade against slavery. In a way, I mean, certainly there were risks for all abolitionists, the men included, but in a way that was much more immediate and much more prominent for women who were engaged in this work than it was even for the men.

### **Justene Hill Edwards**

Frances Watkins Harper was a prominent abolitionist in the 19th century. She wrote quite publicly about her support, not just of the end of slavery, of ending slavery, but really of Black women's political participation in this movement. And so she stood as a very prominent, in many ways, a stark example of the challenges that not just African Americans face, but the unique challenges that Black women faced under the systems of slavery and

really within the structure of American society.

She was really taking up the mantle of women such as Phillis Wheatley, who did not have the same platform as she had, of course. And she was serving in a role that few Black women had the chance to serve in. Harper was, again, at the forefront of conversations about the abolitionist movement, about the political end to slavery, and practically what that would mean for the millions of slaves still in the U.S. And so in many ways, she was a foremother of the later political activism of Black women in the late 19th and early 20th century, especially around the idea of putting thought to paper, in terms of one's writings.

### **Manisha Sinha**

So, African American women, as I argue in my book, were pioneers when it came to abolitionist feminism. They're often forgotten in the history of abolition, but somebody like Maria Stewart, who is one of the first American women to ever speak in public. Even before her, you look at Phyllis Wheatley. She's not just one of the first Black women to be ever published, she's one of the first American women to be ever published.

So they were pioneers, and Garrison says that in *The Liberator*. He points to the Salem Female Anti-Slavery Society which is an all-Black society and later on starts allowing white women to enter it. He says to white women, "Take a lesson from your Black sisters and become active in the abolitionist movement." Or somebody like the Forten sisters on whom John Whittier, the famous abolitionist poet, wrote a poem on the Forten sisters because of their activism. They also belong to a pioneering Black abolitionist family. The patriarch of that family, James Forten, of course, had bankrolled Garrison's *Liberator* when Garrison first started publishing it.

So they came from long genealogies of abolitionist activism and pioneering Black abolitionist families. And African American women were there at the forefront in the 1830s. They are there later on with Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman, who are famous iconic figures, but there are others who are not that well known, who are, it's really important for us to remember them. And I can't mention them all in this short interview, but I do talk about as many of them as possible in my book where I argue that when we think of abolition, we can't just think of singular, outstanding figures. We have to think of it as this movement, as this radical movement that involved many, many Black women who are relatively unknown today.

When we think of the heroes of American democracy, we often forget that those that really reached for its greatest potential, that pushed the boundaries of democracy and demanding human rights for all people, Black and white men and women, were abolitionists. They were people who were demanding not just an end to slavery, but equal

rights. And certainly most of the Garrisonian abolitionists were demanding women's rights.

And when you think of iconic Black abolitionists feminists like Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, they were articulating and acting upon what we call intersectionalism today without using those terms. So I would argue that when you look at the origin points, for instance, of the suffrage movement, you need to look at abolitionist feminists, Black and white, that many times, we forget their activism as a precursor. Those famous women's rights conventions that took place long before the suffrage movement got started after the Civil War.

So they were really imagining democracy in the broadest way and ways in which we are still trying to live up to. And that's why I found them so fascinating to study, because they were visioning a democratic project at a time when over 90% of Black people were enslaved in the South, and where all women had no legal or political standing

at all, no rights to their wages, no rights to their children, no right, in some states, even to divorce their husbands who may be abusive. They had absolutely no legal and political standing at all, leave alone the right to vote or citizenship.

So those struggles are really long and they have been forgotten when we talk about American history. When we think about the march of democracy, we tend to think of it in very linear ways, with very few actors, and actually the story is far more richer. It's far more complex and far more contested. And it's a more interesting story that I think we should pay attention to.

## The Emancipation Proclamation<sup>2</sup>

January 1, 1863

A Transcription

By the President of the United States of America

A Proclamation.

Whereas, on the twenty-second day of September, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty-two, a proclamation was issued by the President of the United States, containing, among other things, the following, to wit:

“That on the first day of January, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty-three, all persons held as slaves within any State or designated part of a State, the people whereof shall then be in rebellion against the United States, shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free; and the Executive Government of the United States, including the military and naval authority thereof, will recognize and maintain the freedom of such persons, and will do no act or acts to repress such persons, or any of them, in any efforts they may make for their actual freedom.

“That the Executive will, on the first day of January aforesaid, by proclamation, designate the States and parts of States, if any, in which the people thereof, respectively, shall then be in rebellion against the United States; and the fact that any State, or the people thereof, shall on that day be, in good faith, represented in the Congress of the United States by members chosen thereto at elections wherein a majority of the qualified voters of such State shall have participated, shall, in the absence of strong countervailing testimony, be deemed conclusive evidence that such State, and the people thereof, are not then in rebellion against the United States.”

Now, therefore I, Abraham Lincoln, President of the United States, by virtue of the power in me vested as Commander-in-Chief, of the Army and Navy of the United States in time of actual armed rebellion against the authority and government of the United States, and as a fit and necessary war measure for suppressing said rebellion, do, on this first day of January, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty-three, and in accordance with my purpose so to do publicly proclaimed for the full period of one hundred days, from the day first above mentioned, order and designate as the States and parts of States wherein the people thereof respectively, are this day in rebellion against the United States, the following, to wit:

Arkansas, Texas, Louisiana, (except the Parishes of St. Bernard, Plaquemines, Jefferson, St. John, St. Charles, St. James Ascension, Assumption, Terrebonne, Lafourche, St. Mary, St. Martin, and Orleans, including the City of New Orleans) Mississippi, Alabama, Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, and Virginia, (except the forty-eight counties designated as West Virginia, and also the counties of Berkley, Accomac, Northampton, Elizabeth City, York, Princess Ann, and Norfolk, including the cities of Norfolk and Portsmouth[]), and which excepted parts, are for the present, left precisely as if this proclamation were not issued.

And by virtue of the power, and for the purpose aforesaid, I do order and declare that all persons held as slaves within said designated States, and parts of States, are, and henceforward shall be free; and that the Executive government of the United States, including the military and naval authorities thereof, will recognize and maintain the freedom of said persons.

And I hereby enjoin upon the people so declared to be free to abstain from all violence, unless in necessary self-defence; and I recommend to them that, in all cases when allowed, they labor faithfully for reasonable wages.

And I further declare and make known, that such persons of suitable condition, will be received into the armed service of the United States to garrison forts, positions, stations, and other places, and to man vessels of all sorts in said service.

And upon this act, sincerely believed to be an act of justice, warranted by the Constitution, upon military necessity, I invoke the considerate judgment of mankind, and the gracious favor of Almighty God.

In witness whereof, I have hereunto set my hand and caused the seal of the United States to be affixed.

Done at the City of Washington, this first day of January, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty three, and of the Independence of the United States of America the eighty-seventh.

By the President: ABRAHAM LINCOLN

WILLIAM H. SEWARD, Secretary of State.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.archives.gov/exhibits/featured-documents/emancipation-proclamation/transcript.html>

*Frederick Douglass delivered this speech at the annual meeting of the American Anti-Slavery Society held in Philadelphia, December 3–4, 1863.*

For twenty–five years... you know that when I got as far South as Philadelphia, I felt that I was rubbing against my prison wall, and could not go any further. I dared not go over yonder into Delaware. Twenty years ago, when I attended the first decade meeting of this Society, as I came along the vales and hills of Gettysburg, my good friends, the anti–slavery people along there warned me to remain in the house during the day–time, and travel in the night, lest I should be kidnapped, and carried over into Maryland. My good friend, Dr. Fussell, was one of the number who did not think it safe for me to attend an antislavery meeting along the borders of this State. I can go down there now. I have been down there to see the President; and as you were not there, perhaps you may like to know how the President of the United States received a black man at the White House. I will tell you how he received me – just as you have seen one gentleman receive another [great applause]; with a hand and a voice well–balanced between a kind cordiality and a respectful reserve. I tell you I felt big there! [Laughter.] Let me tell you how I got to him; because everybody can't get to him. He has to be a little guarded in admitting spectators. The manner of getting to him gave me an idea that the cause was rolling on. The stairway was crowded with applicants. Some of them looked eager; and I have no doubt some of them had a purpose in being there, and wanted to see the President for the good of the country! They were white; and as I was the only dark spot among them, I expected to have to wait at least half a day; I had heard of men waiting a week; but in two minutes after I sent in my card, the messenger came out, and respectfully invited "Mr. Douglass" in. I could hear, in the eager multitude outside, as they saw me pressing and elbowing my way through, the remark, "Yes, damn it, I knew they would let the n—r through," in a kind of despairing voice – a Peace Democrat, I suppose. [Laughter.] When I went in, the President was sitting in his usual position, I was told, with his feet in different parts of the room, taking it easy. [Laughter.] Don't put this down, Mr. Reporter, I pray you; for I am going down there again to–morrow! [Laughter.] As I came in and approached him, the President began to rise, [laughter,] and he continued rising until he stood over me [laughter]; and, reaching out his hand, he said, "Mr. Douglass, I know you; I have read about you, and Mr. Seward has told me about you"; putting me quite at ease at once.

Now, you will want to know how I was impressed by him. I will tell you that, too. He impressed me as being just what every one of you have been in the habit of calling him—an honest man. [Applause.] I never met with a man, who, on the first blush, impressed me more entirely with his sincerity, with his devotion to his country, and with his determination to save it at all hazards. [Applause.] He told me (I think he did me more honor than I deserve) that I had made a little speech, somewhere in New York, and it had got into the papers, and among the things I had said was this: That if I were called upon to state what I regarded as the most sad and most disheartening feature in our present political and military situation, it would not be the various disasters experienced by our armies and our navies, on flood and field, but it would be the tardy, hesitating, vacillating policy of the President of the United States; and the President said to me, "Mr. Douglass, I have been charged with being tardy, and the like"; and he went on, and partly admitted that he might seem slow; but he said, "I am charged with vacillating; but, Mr. Douglass, I do not think that charge can be sustained; I think it cannot be shown that when I have once taken a position, I have ever retreated from it." [Applause.] That I regarded as the most significant point in what he said during our interview. I told him that he had been somewhat slow in proclaiming equal protection to our colored soldiers and prisoners; and he said that the country needed talking up to that point. He hesitated in regard to it, when he felt that the country was not ready for it. He knew that the colored man throughout this country was a despised man, a hated man, and that if he at first came out with such a proclamation, all the hatred which is poured on the head of the Negro race would be visited on his administration. He said that there was preparatory work needed, and that that preparatory work had now been done. And he said, "Remember this, Mr. Douglass; remember that Milliken's Bend, Port Hudson and Fort Wagner are recent events; and that these were necessary to prepare the way for this very proclamation of mine." I thought it was reasonable, but came to the conclusion that while Abraham Lincoln will not go down to posterity as Abraham the Great, or as Abraham the Wise, or as Abraham the Eloquent, although he is all three, wise, great and eloquent, he will go down to posterity, if the country is saved, as Honest Abraham [applause]; and going down thus, his name may be written anywhere in this wide world of ours side by side

<sup>3</sup> <https://rbscp.lib.rochester.edu/4403>

with that of Washington, without disparaging the latter. [Renewed applause.]

But we are not to be saved by the captain, at this time, but by the crew. We are not to be saved by Abraham Lincoln, but by that power behind the throne, greater than the throne itself. You and I and all of us have this matter in hand. Men talk about saving the Union, and restoring the Union as it was. They delude themselves with the miserable idea that that old Union can be brought to life again. That old Union, whose canonized bones we so quietly inurned under the shattered walls of Sumter, can never come to life again. It is dead, and you cannot put life in it. The first ball shot at Sumter caused it to fall as dead as the body of Julius Caesar, when stabbed by Brutus. We do not want it. We have outlived the old Union. We had outlived it long before the rebellion came to tell us – I mean the Union, under the old pro-slavery interpretation of it – and had become ashamed of it. The South hated it with our anti-slavery interpretation, and the North hated it with the Southern interpretation of its requirements. We had already come to think with horror of the idea of being called upon, here in our churches and

literary societies, to take up arms, and go down South and pour the leaden death into the breasts of the slaves, in case they should rise for liberty; and the better part of the people did not mean to do it. They shuddered at the idea of so sacrilegious a crime. They had already become utterly disgusted with the idea of playing the part of bloodhounds for the slave-masters, watch-dogs for the plantations. They had come to detest the principle upon which the Slave States had a larger representation in Congress than the Free States. They had already come to think that the little finger of dear old John Brown was worth more to the world than all the slaveholders in Virginia put together. [Applause.] What business, then, have we to fight for the old Union? We are not fighting for it. We are fighting for something incomparably better than the old Union. We are fighting for unity; unity of idea, unity of sentiment, unity of object, unity of institutions, 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. [Great applause.]

## Speeches by Abraham Lincoln

[Peoria Speech](#), October 16, 1854, in which Lincoln articulates why he disagrees with the Kansas-Nebraska Act.

[Cooper Union Address](#): February 27, 1860, in which Lincoln describes what he believes are the anti-slavery intentions of the signers of the Constitution.

[Gettysburg Address](#): November 19, 1863, in which Lincoln articulates that abolition is a primary goal of the Civil War.

## Further Writings from Frederick Douglass

January 26, 1849 – [On Colonization](#)

February, 1861 – [“The Union and How to Save It”](#)

The University of Rochester’s [Frederick Douglass Project](#)

## Legislation

[Second Confiscation Act](#), in which Congress can fine or imprison anyone in rebellion against the Union (members of the Confederacy), and if they are enslavers, their enslaved people will be freed.



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