

The Complexity of Lincoln Interview Thread Transcript

Lonnie Bunch

What's important to understand about Lincoln is Lincoln is both a product of his time and he's a wonderful lens to look at the contradictions, to look at the challenges of that period. And I think that it's fascinating just to look at how we've thought about Lincoln over time. He was the "Great Emancipator," freed the slaves; he was the martyred president who gave his life to move a nation forward. But then there have been questions about, well, was Lincoln really somebody that cared about slavery and the African American community? There have been scholars who have said Lincoln was racist, Lincoln didn't care about these issues, that freeing the slaves were really just a sort of military necessity.

In many ways, what I find fascinating is that by looking at the way Lincoln has been depicted through the memories we have, it allows us to understand the contradictions in this country. It allows us to understand the challenges we face. And, in essence, what we're looking for is a useful and usable Lincoln. A Lincoln that allows us to sort of better understand that you can make profound change in a nation. Because remember, very few people thought slavery would ever end. Very few people were abolitionists. but yet Lincoln's efforts led to something that most people wouldn't believe. And so in a way, Lincoln's story, Lincoln's history, the way we use Lincoln in our memory, really tells us about the challenges the country still faces.

In essence, for me, the Lincoln story is both a story of possibility, but it's also a story of limits. It's also a story of an unfinished revolution. And I think that's the way I like to think about Lincoln – as a foundation for change, but not something that happened without the leadership of African Americans, without the struggle of African Americans. So he created a process that helped to lead to emancipation, but emancipation was really done on the backs of African Americans.

Jelani Cobb

I think the reason why you have such contradictory takes on Lincoln is that one, he was the embodiment of highly contradictory times. And as a politician, he was trying to navigate the currents of really irreconcilable ideas. And if you add into that equation his own personal growth and development, and the fact that he's a politician who may or may not believe 100% of what he's saying in public at any given time, what you have is the makings of an enigma.

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You know, a person who is so layered and so complicated that if you try to summarize him in any single sentence, you're likely leaving out something that is equally important and completely the opposite, and also true about him. And so I think that's one of the reasons why people have never tired of discussing Lincoln, even his critics. He's not the type of person like, you know, it's his successor, Andrew Johnson, whom history cast a verdict on, and he's rarely revisited. There's no real kind of question about, did we get Andrew Johnson wrong? But with Lincoln, even the people who don't like him can't stop talking about him. And I think that says something about who he was.

I think it's possible to tell a true story about Lincoln, or it's possible to tell a truer story about Lincoln, and – to get at the exact truth of any human being, much less one as complicated and tested and really layered as Lincoln, that's a daunting task. That may not be possible. But it's like the idea of a more perfect union. You know, you don't get a perfect union. You're not going to have a perfect union. But the ideal is to establish a more perfect union. And so we can try to strive for a truer idea of who Lincoln was and what he did, and what he stood for, but the truth, I think that'll always remain at least partially an enigma. I think it's crucial to try to get to who Lincoln was, in the context of his time and in the moment that he existed in, because that's the only real way that we can make use of him as an example. You know, we can't really learn anything from -- certainly we can't learn anything from as sterile and antiseptic a depiction of Lincoln as we have now, but it is in understanding the trial and error and the failures and the shortcomings and the contradictions that he becomes most useful to us. And really, only by understanding the things he got wrong can we really grasp the magnitude and importance of the things that he got right.

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In our popular reference now, we think of abolitionists as people who thought that the races should be equal. That wasn't true necessarily. There were people who did think this way, and then there were people who had a kind of animal rights approach to the institution of slavery, that they didn't think that it was right to treat people the way that they'd been treated, or to hold them in bondage, or to sell them, or to do any of the things that went with the institution of slavery, but that should not be taken to mean that Black people and white people are equal. That's an abolitionist camp. Lincoln was not in the abolitionist camp, if we say, by abolitionism, people who

were actively fighting for the eradication of the institution of slavery. Southerners preferred to think of him as this. You know, certainly by 1860, by the election, it would've been hard to shake them of the sense that Lincoln was no different than William Lloyd Garrison, but his ideas were contradictory in our modern sensibilities. He had a general disdain for the institution of slavery. He did not think that it was defensible to subject people to the kinds of depredations that were inherent in slavery.

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At the same time, racial equality, he says in the course of the Lincoln-Douglas debates famously that if there's a superior and inferior position to be assigned in this society, he, as any white man, would prefer that whites be assigned to the superior position. You know, his defenders have argued that this was political rhetoric or this was an attempt to get elected and so on, but, at the very least, he's willing to play to that cause. The more indicting idea about Lincoln is, toward the end of his life, where he's sketching out his plans for what a reconstruction might look like. You know, the war has freshly ended and there has to be some mechanism for bringing the feuding halves of the country back into one whole. And he does recognize that Negro suffrage is going to be key to this. And he kind of muses that perhaps the Black vote could be restricted to former soldiers or, quote, very intelligent Blacks, which in a country that made no intelligence bar for white suffrage, inherently states that he may believe that there's something suspect about Black intelligence and Black capacity to utilize the ballot. And so he's riddled with the contradictions of men of his era. And I've maintained that the argument for Lincoln's heroism is not that he got everything right. It was his willingness to grapple with the questions, even the questions he got wrong. And so, no, those two things are not the same though. His disdain for the institution of slavery did not automatically connote a belief in interracial equality.

after the Crosswhites make it to Detroit, where one of the white abolitionists who was involved in the mob confronts one of the slave catchers in jail. And he says, the court record suggests that this white abolitionist essentially says, "Your Negroes are gone." And he's sort of like gloating, like mocking this slave owner in this moment that the people that you're trying to get are out of your reach. And so you can kind of see in this case that Black folks knew that their freedom was tenuous and that they had been cultivating, before the Fugitive Slave Act, they'd been cultivating networks of support, networks of self-defense that would enable them to ensure their freedom. And so those kinds of networks are – I don't even want to say being revived – they're being redeployed in the 1850s in the aftermath of the Fugitive Slave Act. But these are practices that were years, if not decades old, by the time of things like the Anthony Burns incident.

Edna Greene Medford

I think first and foremost, we sort of venerate Lincoln to the extent that people still do because he did show compassion, not always in the way we would have liked him to. But he was someone who tried to be measured, who did show sympathy from time to time, always to individuals, but understood what the country was involved in at the time. So, I think that that's primarily why he's still so beloved in certain circles today. But I think we need to also recognize that as great a person as he was as a human being, he was also a flawed human being. He was not perfect. Neither should he have been. You know, he was not Jesus Christ and some people think that he was. I mean, they put him on that level.

But this was a man who was flawed. I think he probably did the best he could given the circumstances. I still don't understand, though, why he did some things. I just shake my head sometimes when I read certain things that he did that I think he could have done differently, because I know that because of some of his decisions more people died than needed to have died. When he's allowing the Union commanders to return runaways to their owners, they're going back to their deaths in some instances, or they're being sold away from their families. If he had put something in place earlier and said, "Any enslaved person who makes their way to the Union lines, they're free. Don't return them." But he didn't do that initially, and so it's those kinds of things, you know, that really do bother me.

I remember being told once by a senior faculty member when I was young and still wet behind the ears that I expected Lincoln to be something that he could not be, and perhaps I should sort of let it go and realize this is a person who did the best he could under the circumstances. I don't know that I'm there, but I have certainly a different appreciation for what he was having to deal with. Not just a war, but dissension in his own party, loss of his friends because of his stance on emancipation. So he was going through a lot. The death of his children, a wife who was frustrated in her own right because she was a woman and could not express herself in the way that men could politically, so he was dealing with a lot.

I think that if you can appreciate his complexity, he becomes greater, only because you know that he's a human being like the rest of us. And despite that, I mean, he was flawed, but he found a way around some of those flaws. He was not perfect, not at all, but he was able to accomplish some things that someone who was less great or with less ambition or with less skill would not have been successful at.

And so he was the right person at the right time for the nation and for African Americans, too. I don't give him credit for everything that happened with African Americans during this period, because we did a lot of it ourselves as well, but I do give him part. He was central to

the whole thing. And so to suggest that what he did was not significant is not to understand that period of history, I think. He was important to the cause, central to the cause, but he's not the only one.

So the term "Great Emancipator," for instance, not if you're suggesting by Great Emancipator that he single-handedly ended slavery. No, he did not. But in terms of having the courage to do what was right and what was necessary, because what he did was not just right, it was necessary to save the Union. But there's some people who would have allowed the Union to just split forever rather than do what he was willing to do, and so I think that's what makes him great.

When I first started studying Lincoln, I looked primarily at the LincolnDouglas debates. That's how I was introduced to Lincoln. And I remember the Charleston debate was what we would call very racist during this day because he used the N-word and he said some things, other things that were not flattering to people of color. But then when I really started digging deeper into his speeches and into his private correspondence with friends and allies in the Republican Party, I noticed that there was more to him than that. So I came to the conclusion that he was a very complex individual. This is someone who was Southern born, actually, born in Kentucky. He was a man of the South in many ways and he certainly was a white man of his time. But there were things that were different about him, I think. He certainly could see beyond what the average white American could see in terms of the ability of people to make themselves better. And so I came to appreciate that complexity more and more as I read more of what he had actually said.

Initially I thought that he moved extremely slowly, at a snail's pace. After having studied him longer for years and years, there are things I would've liked that he could have changed that he didn't. I think he spent too much time trying to get the border states to emancipate. I think he put too much effort into trying to protect the property of people who had rebelled against the nation.

We're not talking about American citizens who are behaving like American citizens, we're talking about people who are in open rebellion who are killing Northern soldiers and sailors, and he still had compassion for them. I couldn't have done that. I don't know that I would want anyone to do that. I just think that he was a little bit too magnanimous to people who were causing the problem. So I think that's where I'm stuck. Why would he do that?