SEAN WILENTZ
LINCOLN'S DILEMMA
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

Sean Wilentz Interview
12-10-2020
Interviewed by Jackie Olive & Barak Goodman
Total Running Time: 02:19:34

START TC: 00:00:00:00

CREW MEMBER:
Mr. Sean Wilentz interview, take one. Mark.

Slavery's cultural and economic importance in the 1800s

00:00:15:00

SEAN WILENTZ:

Slavery was at the heart of Southern culture, the heart of American culture in any ways too, but certainly Southern culture. I mean, the American South was the richest, wealthiest slave society on Earth in the 1850s and 1860s. Indeed, maybe even in history, some have said. So you cannot think about the old South without thinking about slavery. I mean, the safe side, there's 3.8 million slaves, right? Enslaved people, that's from the start, it tells you something about how important slavery was to the South. And the American economy relied to a certain extent on cotton and the cotton exports, and cotton was the major export coming from the United States abroad. And that cotton was being produced by enslaved labor. So, it's impossible to think of the United States without thinking about slavery.

Teaching slavery in today's education system

00:01:13:00

SEAN WILENTZ:

I've got to say, the quality of education when I was in school, and you could go through an entire course of American history and know something about slavery, but not really understand the institution and how important it was and how the institution came to be, how the institution changed. All of that. That's much more central than it was, there's been a revolution in American historical studies over the last 50 years, really, in the centrality of slavery, which had been denied for a very long time. The Civil War, some said, wasn't fought about slavery, it was fought about states' rights and so forth.

SEAN WILENTZ:

And you still hear that out there, which tells you something about the lack of... the shortcomings of secondary education. But I think we've actually gotten much closer to being right than we had before. As I say, slavery underwent, about the same time, not coincidentally, the same time as the Civil Rights movement really got going in the 1950s, historians began to put slavery back at the center of American history where it belongs. And at this point, I don't think that you can get a decent, certainly a college education in the history of the United States in that period, without having slavery right there. I know that because I teach that at that period right here at Princeton, and the name of my course is “Slavery and Democracy in the New Republic.”

SEAN WILENTZ:

So it's about those two things, slavery and democracy. How they could coexist. How they became contradictory. That's at the heart of what American history was in that period. And then the consequences of emancipation, the consequences of the war are still very much with us. I mean, that's not a historical question. That's a political question. So yeah, I mean slavery – well,

slavery and race, the two are connected, obviously. I mean, they're not exactly the same thing, but, in so far as slavery placed African-Americans in a particular place in the social hierarchy and the social order, et cetera, et cetera, a kind of oppression – the identification of slavery with race, with Africans, people of African descent, that is still very central to American history, to American life.

Slave narratives

00:03:34:00

SEAN WILENTZ:

The slave narratives were crucial to the anti-slavery movement, first of all. And to changing Northern opinion about slavery. Understand that once the slave narratives started to appear – Frederick Douglass' most famously, but not just Frederick Douglass' – people in the North didn't have much of a comprehension of what slavery was. There was a lot of mythology about the happy slaves and how great it all was for everybody, and it was a benevolent institution and all of that. And the slave narratives really punctured through that. The slave narratives really forced Northerners to come to terms with slavery in a way that they hadn't before. Not that all of them would, but many of them did. And it was not just the narratives, but having the former slaves who escaped... What's the term for them now? "Fugitive slaves" they used to be called... The slaves would escape from slavery, who had freed themselves.

SEAN WILENTZ:

It wasn't just they wrote, they actually went out and lectured, they actually went around and gave important lectures. Frederick Douglass, most famously of them, and Frederick Douglass would say, "People want to know where I was schooled." And he would say, "My diploma is on my back." A very

powerful statement. And then people knew what he was talking about, that he had been educated in the ways of cruelty that was the essence of slavery. So the narratives are very important. Now, the narratives are filtered. It's not just unfiltered testimony, because it's filtered through the people who are helping to compile them and write them. And so it was written for a political purpose. They were propaganda in effect. I mean, they're not quite literature, they're not quite propaganda. They're somewhere in between the two, but they were very, very important. I would say second only to something like *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which had a great deal of effect, but *Uncle Tom's Cabi*n grew in part out of the slave narratives. So the two go together.

The Constitution and slavery

00:05:35:00

SEAN WILENTZ:

At the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia in 1787, there were anti-slavery delegates there. There were pro-slavery delegates there as well, particularly from South Carolina and Georgia. And they wanted to make sure that slavery was given as much protection as possible under this new Constitution. They'd seen the northern states had begun emancipation as early as 1780 in Pennsylvania, and they were worried about what was going on in the North. And they thought, maybe now that we're forming this powerful new nation, maybe these guys are going to do something about slavery that we won't like. So they came to the convention really loaded for all of that. The anti-slavery people were loaded too, as it were. Well, I don't want to put it that way. The anti-slavery people were prepared as well. And so there were these conflicts over slavery on various issues, which led to the compromises, the famous compromises in Philadelphia over the Three-fifths Clause. And that wasn't as much a compromise, but certainly it gave the

southern states, the slave-holding states, extra power in the House of Representatives, and then the Electoral College. The 20-year delay of abolishing the transatlantic slave trade, that was very important, although the fact that they managed to get anything in the Constitution that the federal government could abolish slavery – that was something the southerners did not want to see happen. So they weren't happy about what happened with all of that. They went back and they had to explain it to everybody back home.

SEAN WILENTZ:

And it was not that easy to explain. And then the Fugitive Slave Clause as well, or the... It's actually the Fugitive Servant Clause, because it refers to servants rather than to slaves. But there were these compromises that were there, and without those compromises it's unlikely that South Carolina or Georgia would have gone into the Union, and then it would have been no nation at all, as far as the people who were there at the convention were concerned.

At the same time, though, there was a question as to what the position of slavery was going to be in national law. It's important to remember the Constitution is a federal document. It's forming a nation out of states. There's going to be national law, the things that the nation can do, the national government can do, and there are going to be the things that the states can do. And a great deal is left to the states, including property laws and all things like that. And it was pretty clear from the beginning that the status of slavery, in the states where it already existed, was not going to be threatened by the national government.

SEAN WILENTZ:

The question then, though, was, What do we do about national law? What do we do about those as areas where the federal government has purview, like over the national territories, for example, or in the new federal city they were going to... They didn't know what it was going to be called, but they identified

it. The high seas, there are a bunch of places where the federal government would have purview. Would slavery be tolerated there? Or would slavery would be automatically tolerated there? And the delegates at the Convention made it very clear that they were not going to let that happen. I mean that they were not going to allow slavery to be part of national law, to be inscribed in national law. It leads to one of the things that really confused people about the Constitution. The Constitution... Slavery is certainly there, but the word– the first time that the word slavery appears in the Constitution is in the 13th Amendment, which abolished slavery.

SEAN WILENTZ:

The word does not appear. And historians, we have arguments about why that was. But the record, I think, shows pretty clearly that it wasn't that they were embarrassed about slavery. They weren't trying to hide it. If they tried to hide it, they were doing a pretty bad job, because people could figure it out pretty quickly. But they wanted to make sure that the idea of one person owning another, what they called property in man, at that point, that that would not be part of national law.

00:09:22:00

SEAN WILENTZ:

The delegates from South Carolina and Georgia, they were a wily bunch. They did their best to get it in there. All kinds of places, you can read the records that are left of the federal convention. And you can see them, sneaky doing this. Every time they tried, they get shot down. The convention majority will not allow that.

SEAN WILENTZ:

Now, we can... Historians argue all the time about why that was. How much did the Framers really expect that slavery was on the way out? Certainly the

delegates from South Carolina and Georgia did not think that slavery was on the way out. They thought that that was the center of their life, and they were going to keep it going. But there were many who did, there are many who thought that the slave economy, which was then based on tobacco, not on cotton – this is before the cotton revolution – that slavery was going to eventually fade away, that the force of the American Revolution was so great. And the economy, the economics of the tobacco trade, which at that point, I like to say to my students, there were only so many pipes in Europe, right?

SEAN WILENTZ:

There's only so much tobacco that was going to be purchased. There was a glut in the trade. So there was a feeling that this is not going to last that much longer amongst some of the delegates. So we can argue, we do argue, about how much the Framers actually thought, that generation actually thought, slavery was on the way out. Some did, some didn't. But regardless of that, the majority of the convention wanted to make sure that slavery was not going to be made an intrinsic part of the new nation. That the new nation was not going to be a slave holder's republic, in the way that, for example, the constitution of the Confederacy, the constitution that the seceding South actually created in 1861. Oh yeah, all the parts in the federal constitution where they kept slavery out, they put it in. They actually say, "Yeah, now we've got the constitution that we ought to have really had in 1787." But that was at the end of a long fight about slavery, which was going to lead to the Civil War. So that was a very different kind of constitutional proposition.

Slavery and the political system: Early 19th century

00:11:30:00

SEAN WILENTZ:

By 1850 certainly, slavery is intrinsic to American political life. The slaveholders had more or less dominated American political life for a very long time. The most important thing to understand is the Cotton Revolution first of all. I mean, after 1787, in 1793, the invention of the cotton gin makes it possible to grow cotton at a scale and in places that it simply wasn't going to be possible before that, feeding into making cotton the most valuable agricultural commodity in the world because of the Industrial Revolution. The Industrial Revolution's leading sector was a manufacturer of cotton in Britain, but also in New England. And so, cotton was really – today, it was a bit like the petroleum: what petroleum became in the 20th century, cotton was in the 19th century. It was a valuable agricultural, extractable commodity right, or agricultural commodity.

SEAN WILENTZ:

So that's number one, is to understand that cotton, that slavery is going to have a rebirth. The institution of slavery undergoes a rebirth, which is crucial to understanding the politics of all of that. From the beginning, as I say, the South Carolinians and the Georgians, I always say it's nothing personal, but it's always South Carolina. It's always South Carolina, that's at the forefront of pro-slavery militants. And they had been from the very beginning, which has to do with the politics of South Carolina, but at any rate, from the very beginning they are fighting very hard. But the expansion of a cotton kingdom is going to mean that you're going to have, in politics as well as in the culture, as well as in the economy, you're going to have a force that's very, very pro-slavery, increasingly pro-slavery, that hadn't been there from the beginning. New slave states come in, Alabama, Mississippi, later on there's going to be a fight over Missouri, but this is going to change the political dynamics fundamentally.

SEAN WILENTZ:

There are the ways that the parties get aligned very early on. The Jeffersonian Republicans, they were not all of the slave holders by any means, but they were a slave holding interest that was connected somewhat paradoxically to the more liberal interests of the North, to the small artisans and so forth. There was this very, very, to us now, looking back, kind of contradictory alliance that was part of American politics. And that was going to have a lot to do as well with keeping slavery there, making slavery even more central to American politics than the Framers might've imagined that it would be.

SEAN WILENTZ:

There is this interesting moment, this very interesting moment in 1819, 1820, because there had been an anti-slavery movement in the North, and it gets going and it's there, and it's not as big as it's going to be, but it's pretty ferocious in certain places. In 1819 Missouri applies to become a new state. And the question is, is Missouri going to be allowed to come in with slavery or without slavery? Slavery already existed in Missouri at that point, so everybody assumed, nah, it was going to be a slave state.

SEAN WILENTZ:

Well, a New Yorker named James Tallmadge gets up and says, "No, we're going to amend the statehood bill and slavery will not be allowed to survive in Missouri. We're going to get rid of slavery in Missouri." It causes this huge crisis. And for the better part of two years, actually, there's talk that there's going to be a civil war. Now, there are some people who say that if there was a civil war in 1819, it would have amounted to a fistfight on the floor of the House of Representatives. But that's a little misleading too, because there really was a very strong anti-slavery, Free Missouri movement it was called, that got going in 1819, 1820. Really scared people.

00:15:15:00

SEAN WILENTZ:

John Quincy Adams, who at that point was the Secretary of State, writes in his diary, it's a very famous diary, he writes in his diary, he sees a terrible portent because the South can understand, the southern slaveholders can understand, that there's a new party, ready formed, as he put it, that is out to get rid of their institution, to get rid of slavery.

SEAN WILENTZ:

In the aftermath of that crisis, the political center decides that they're going to clamp down on the whole question. They don't want to see the Missouri crisis happen again. So they are determined to keep the issue of slavery out of national politics. And an entire political system grows up dedicated to the proposition that slavery, either anti-slavery or pro-slavery, it's not going to become subject to debate the way that it had been at that moment in 1819, 1820. So going into the 1830s and really into the 1840s, you have a political system, political parties that are dedicated to keeping slavery out of debate. That's functionally about as pro-slavery, as you can imagine, right? We're not going to talk about it. It exists. It's going to keep going.

SEAN WILENTZ:

So you have this political system, which, it looked like it might be able to open up for a minute, and then there was a shutdown. And that's where the history of anti-slavery gets really interesting too, because that's where, while you get the likes of David Walker up in Boston, a free Black from North Carolina. David Walker, a free Black from North Carolina who had migrated up to Boston, writes a fiery pamphlet calling for an appeal to the colored people of the world, calling upon them to renounce slavery, to rise up. And if white people did not want to give slaves their freedom, well, then they were going to take it anyway. That was pretty scary, but that was outside of politics, you

see. David Walker was in part a reaction to the fact that politics had closed down.

SEAN WILENTZ:

And then David Walker is followed by the likes of William Lloyd Garrison, and the rise of the immediate abolitionist in the 1830s, much more radical than the previous anti-slavery movements had been. That's in part a matter of just disgust. But it's also a matter of the fact that there was no place for them to go, that politics was not going to work. The idea of moral suasion – that was the only way that you were possibly going to get it over with, the political system was so corrupt that getting involved in it was going to get you nowhere. So, by the 1830s, there's a feeling, in fact, that the political system is deeply pro-slavery. And then Abraham Lincoln is going to come out of all of that.

The anti-slavery movement in the 1830s

00:18:11:00

SEAN WILENTZ:

In the 1830s, two things conjoined, right? One was, Black abolitionists in the cities in particular, New York, Philadelphia, Boston – the outcome of northern emancipation had in part been the growth of Black communities in the bigger cities, right, wanting to get away from where they've been, coming to the big cities. And there is a really very impressive collection of institutions, churches above all. The AME church gets born in the 1790s, but it really grows in the cities thereafter. The Prince Hall Masonic Lodge, I mean, you name them, there are lots of different groups out there. The first Black newspaper is founded in 1827, *Freedom's Journal*, in New York City by John Russwurm and Samuel Cornish. There is a Black abolitionist constituency that had not been

there at the end of the 18th century, that has grown. That's crucial to understanding the direction that anti-slavery politics is going to take.

SEAN WILENTZ:

You then have also a religious revival among Blacks and whites, that we refer to it as the Second Great Awakening, which evangelicized American Protestantism to no small degree. Now that wasn't necessarily going to lead people automatically to be anti-slavery. But it led a lot of people in that direction, because it emphasized questions of personal righteousness, of one's personal relationship to God. It changed the whole connection between man, women, and God in ways that required people to take account of their own relationship to slavery among other institutions. And between the two of those things, I think, the Second Great Awakening and the growth of Black abolitionism, there is the beginnings of a truly radical abolitionist movement. We date it – I always date it from David Walker, but that's okay – most people date it from 1831, when William Lloyd Garrison gets his newspaper, *The Liberator*, going, followed soon thereafter, a couple of years later, by the founding of the American Anti-Slavery Society, which is the first great mass anti-slavery organization in the United States. There had been others out there, but they're mostly local.

SEAN WILENTZ:

This was a bigger deal. This is going to transform the whole character of anti-slavery politics. It's going to make it much more broad-based. It's a mass movement. And they adopt all kinds of very – what should we say? – imaginative ways to try to force the issue. They weren't going to be able to run people for office. They didn't think that was a good idea, but they were going to force the issue through direct action. How are they going to do that? Well, they did it through petitions in large measure, they got hundreds and thousands of people to sign petitions calling for the end of the domestic slave

trade, calling for above all the abolition of slavery in the nation's capital, which was a very powerful idea at that point, because you just see, as I said earlier, the federal government had control over D.C., had control over the government of the District of Columbia. So it was believed that Congress really could abolish slavery there. It couldn't do it anywhere else. We couldn't do it in any of the existing States, but it could do it there.

SEAN WILENTZ:

So these petitions really roil the Congress, and the southerners were getting very... The southern slave holders are very upset about all of this. And there's a small group of northerners, led by actually ex-President John Quincy Adams, who are standing up for these petitions and saying, "You have to listen to these. You have to listen to these." And the southerners say, "We're not going to ... We're not even going to honor them with the idea of listening to them. We're not even... We're going to table them right away. We're not even going to... We're going to stop." So they adopt something called the Gag Rule, which prevents these anti-slavery petitions from coming to the fore.

SEAN WILENTZ:

It backfires of course, on the southerners, because the more that this happens, the more people begin to think, "Well, wait a minute, you guys are not allowing American democracy to happen. You're not allowing people to voice their will." There's one famous story out of all of this. When John Quincy Adams gets up with a petition, and it's sort of a, well … He gets in front of the House of Representatives and he said, "I here have a petition signed by X number of slaves." Of slaves?! Well, the southerners, you can imagine, they go absolutely nuts. I mean, it's one thing to have anti-slavery people petitioning the Congress, but to have enslaved people petitioning the Congress? So they go crazy and they try to stop it. And they stop, they, Point of order, Point of order, blah, blah, blah. And then they want to stop John Quincy Adams. And

then Quincy Adams reads the petition to say, "Yes, we slaves are very happy to be in slavery."

00:23:01:00

SEAN WILENTZ:

Now this was... The southerners are going, "Oh God." It was all a way to just embarrass them, which he was very effective at doing, he and his group inside of Congress. So you can see here, you see the politicians did not want to allow slavery to be involved in national debates, but the abolitionists force it. The abolitionists force it to happen. They're not there to run people for office, but they're forcing it. They're making it possible. And every time this happens, it's all over every newspaper. It's publicizing the cause. The other thing they do is they get anti-slavery pamphlets and they send them down to the South. They put them in the mails down to the South. In those days, now we get our mail sent to us, apart from email and all of that, but real snail mail, we get our mail delivered. Those of us who were old enough to remember stamps and stuff. In those days, you could have sent a whole bunch of stuff to the local postmaster, and the bulk postmaster was duty bound, actually, to keep those pamphlets in the post office where anybody could pick them up.

SEAN WILENTZ:

So the American Anti-Slavery Society starts blanketing the South with these and the postmaster is supposed to keep those things there. Well, they don't know this stuff. Who's going to pick it up? A free person of color could come by and pick it up, read it. Hmm. Maybe that, maybe most likely that person knows someone who's enslaved. Maybe that gets out to them too. This is dangerous, as far as the southerners are concerned. For the American Anti-Slavery Society, it's a way to raise hell. It's a way they took too... It's “direct action” as we call it in the 21st century. They were the masters of all of that.

SEAN WILENTZ:

So that was the politics that they practiced in the 1830s. And it did a lot to raise the consciousness of northern whites about the status of slavery. It was going to remain a minority movement. It was going to remain outside of politics. But even then it was larger. It was 100,000, 150,000 people signing those petitions. That was a sea change from what had been, even in the 1820s, when there was that movement that was going. It ran into difficulties. It did not free a single slave, if you will. I mean, it didn't change a law. It didn't get that done. It raised consciousness.

SEAN WILENTZ:

But by the time you get to the end of the 1830s, there's kind of a feeling of exhaustion actually, I mean, they've been at it for 10 years. Moral suasion. The South wasn't going to get rid of slavery. All the moral suasion in the world was not going to get rid of slavery. What would... What was going to happen? Where was change going to come? Black abolitionists were particularly... They'd been holding national conventions, but they're beginning to think, maybe we have to go in a different direction. And a number of the white abolitionists in the American Anti-slavery started beginning to think the same thing. So the movement hits a crossroads right at 1840 actually, at the end of that decade. The movement hits a crossroads about what direction it's going to take.

The anti-slavery movement in the 1840s

00:26:18:00

SEAN WILENTZ:

In 1840, the American Anti-Slavery Society, the great abolitionist society, splits. It splits in part over the question of whether women should be

involved in the leadership of the movement. A lot of people, Garrison included, wanted to turn the American slavery movement into a much broader reform movement to take on a whole bunch of causes, including the cause of women's rights. Whereas there were others who said, "Look, we have our hands full just dealing with slavery. We have to stick to that." And the movement splits. The movement also splits on the question of politics. Garrison and others truly believed that the American Constitution, and the American political system, was intrinsically pro-slavery. Garrison is later going to burn the constitution of the United States in Massachusetts in the commons there. In Boston, but it's, I forget, Framingham, somewhere up there. He burns the Constitution, age 54, saying that it's a covenant with death and an agreement made in hell. That America itself is intrinsically pro-slavery. Not all the abolitionists agreed with him about that. They were abolitionists who looked back on the Constitution, what we talked about earlier with the Constitutional Convention, who saw anti-slavery potential in the Constitution that Garrison and his supporters did not.

SEAN WILENTZ:

This actually ends up being the majority of the abolitionist movement, actually drift over to this point of view. One thing that they do is to start a political party. They say, look, what's the center of this “democratic” political system we have? Since the 1820s, white male suffrage had already spread, but you have the growth of political parties. You had involvement of ordinary white men on property, as well as property, that hadn't existed before. It was a big deal that it hadn't been quite before. If we're going to get anywhere in terms of slavery, we better be involved in politics. We can't stay outside of politics. There's room for us in politics. We can defend our views, we can attack slavery and still defend the Constitution of the United States because there's an opening here for us.

SEAN WILENTZ:

Well, they started that opening in 1840. They form a political party. They nominate James G. Birney, a former slaveholder from Kentucky that ended up in Ohio. They don't actually call it the Liberty Party yet, but they're going to. A man named Garrett Smith in New York, was a great radical abolitionist, he's going to give it the name. But anyway, they run and they get 7,000 votes. Now, that's pretty small. There's not a mass outpouring of support for the Liberty Party in 1840. Which, if you're only interested in getting votes, would have been very discouraging. But the Liberty Party was after something more than that. They knew that this was the beginning, not the end. They began attracting all sorts of new people into their ranks.

SEAN WILENTZ:

A man named Salmon Chase from Ohio was a friend of Birney's. He switches from the Whig Party over to the Liberty Party. That's going to be the germ of the anti-slavery politics that, eventually, is going to bring in Abraham Lincoln and lead to the Republican Party in the late 1850s.

00:29:38:00

SEAN WILENTZ:

But it begins in 1840 with the formation of the Liberty Party. Much is going to happen in the 1840s which is going to change the character of anti-slavery politics. It has to do, again, with westward expansion. It has to do with America's imperial ambitions. But it's going to bring the issue of slavery back in, in a way that the mainstream had hoped to keep it out.

SEAN WILENTZ:

This time, however, you do have an abolitionist movement that's a mass movement. This time, you do have a Liberty Party. This time, you have people, even in the Democratic and Whig parties who are beginning to feel uncomfortable with the fact that slavery is being kept out. They can't keep it

out any longer. So, by the time you get back to these questions in the 1840s, it's going to be very different political calculus.

The fall of the Whig Party

00:30:31:00

SEAN WILENTZ:

In the 1840s, there's a lot of pressure, as I said, because of America's imperial ambitions, et cetera, the annexation of Texas, and then the Mexican War and the grabbing of half of Mexico. Well, that's not true. Am I right about that? It doubles the size of the United States at any rate. Means there's a lot more land and all those issues about territories and slavery and what's going to become of these territories, they're opened up again.

SEAN WILENTZ:

Now, of the two parties, the Whig Party is better disposed to anti-slavery than the Democratic Party was. The Democratic Party really was ... Many of the largest slave holders were, in fact, Whigs, but the Democrats ended up becoming the party that was taken over, really, by the slaveholders. The pro-slavery interest in the South.

SEAN WILENTZ:

The Whig Party had a Southern wing that was very powerful, many slaveholders there, but it could not sustain itself under the pressure of the politics of the 1840s. By the time you get to 1854, a crucial date in understanding all of these politics, with the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, the Whig Party dissolved. The Whig party falls apart. Southern Whigs are all for the Kansas-Nebraska Act, Northern Whigs were all against the Kansas-Nebraska Act. This party can not exist any longer. Which is going to leave a lot of people without a political home, including a Whig

ex-congressman from Illinois named Abraham Lincoln, who doesn't have a home anymore. He doesn't know where he is in politics. At the same time, he understands that, look, slavery is now inevitably at the center of our politics. There's no keeping it out anymore. We can't think about politics without thinking about the question of Kansas-Nebraska and thinking about the question of slavery. So, politics changed profoundly.

SEAN WILENTZ:

Before 1854, Abraham Lincoln was a stalwart Whig. He said he was a Henry Clay Whig. He was a great admirer of the Kentucky Senator Henry Clay. He believed in the program of the Whig Party, which at that point was in favor of things like internal improvements, building canals, railroads, using federal support to do all of that, a high tariff. He saw the Whigs, as opposed to the Democrats, as being the party of progress, the party of uplift, the party of improvement.

SEAN WILENTZ:

He was a very dedicated Whig, and stayed that way right up to, as he himself said, until there was nothing. He was in the Whig Party until there was no Whig Party left for him to be in anymore. He believed in the Whig cause.

Now, understanding that this all goes back to the Missouri Compromise, again. The idea was that the Missouri Compromise had supposedly settled the question of slavery and expansion. They let Missouri in as a slave state, but it meant that everything above 36 degrees, 30 minutes was going to be free soil.

SEAN WILENTZ:

The Kansas-Nebraska Act undid that. It undid that. When you undid that, then the whole thing's going to fall down, fall apart politically. It means now that all bets are off. It means now that the “Slave Power,” as they called it, is

on the offensive. It means now that the last protections we had about possibly stopping slavery's expansion, that has been undone, this agreement that was made in 1820.

00:34:11:00

SEAN WILENTZ:

So that people like Lincoln, who are anti-slavery – his anti-slavery politics are pretty clear at that point, but it was a recessive, it was not at the front of his politics, it was more at the middle or the back of his politics. Now, it is at the very front. With Kansas-Nebraska, there is no way that politics is going to be able to go back to the way it was under the Whigs and Democrats. It wasn't just the Whig Party fell apart, but the entire political system was transformed. And slavery, then, is the major issue, as it will remain right through the end of slavery in 1865.

The global history of slavery and its legacy

00:34:56:00

SEAN WILENTZ:

Enduring issue? Well, we ended slavery, but the effects of slavery certainly are, sure. It's not the only enduring issue, but it's one of them. Look, at the heart of American history, I believe, is the same contradiction that arose in 1787. It's the contradiction between a democratic republic and the institution of slavery. The founding generation thought that you could establish one with the other at the same time. It took a horrific Civil War to undo that idea, but the institution was strong enough.

SEAN WILENTZ:

Then, the aftermath of the Civil War wasn't just slavery itself, but the fact that the politics of Reconstruction ended up the way that they did meant that the promise of the war was shut down. A southern white ruling class came back to try and impose, as close as they could, to impose the institution of slavery back. And they were allowed to do so for a very long time, until the revolutions of the 1950s and 1960s. In so far as you're talking about slavery, yes. It's about slavery, but it's also about the politics as it formed out of that. There's always a struggle. There was always a struggle. The struggle was there from the start.

SEAN WILENTZ:

It's important, I think – I try to get my students to see this. There was never a point where slavery was everything. There was hardly ever a point when anti-slavery was everything. But there was always a struggle. The struggle, that is American history, in many ways. It's not the only struggle, but it's the central one, I think. We have to see an American history in those terms. That's really the way I do. But to have abolished slavery, which was an extraordinary thing, when you think about it. Until the Revolutionary Era, there was no anti-slavery among white people. There was none. The Quakers, some, at the end of the 17th century, but slavery had been an institution that went back millennia. It goes back to classical times. Slavery in the New World was there from the beginning in the 15th century. It was there. Then, African slavery comes in very quickly.

00:37:20:00

SEAN WILENTZ:

This was accepted. No one said anything. I mean, the enslaved had plenty to say about it, but their revolts were crushed. They could not prevent the expansion of this vast plantation complex throughout the New World, slave-based plantation complex. When you step back, then, when you take the

long view, the abolition of slavery is an extraordinary thing. It's not just an American story. It's a story that, in Britain and in France and other places, all of the European monarchies that established slavery in the New World, all had to deal with it in one way or another.

SEAN WILENTZ:

But when you think that, for all the millennia that slavery had existed, and then to think within the space of 70, 80 years, in the case of the British, less than that, the institution is abolished in the West – well, not in the ... It's abolished in the United States. It's still going to continue in Cuba and Brazil. But nevertheless, it's on the defensive. This is an extraordinary turnabout to me, historically. It astonishes me, actually, to think of how the combination of slaves, the slave people, free Blacks, white abolitionists, white politicians, how that converged to end this institution that had been so powerful for so long, and so unquestioned for so long, so rationalized for so long as the work of God, let alone the work of man. That slavery was biblical.

SEAN WILENTZ:

This is an amazing story, actually, when you stop back and look at it. Maybe the greatest story in modern history, I think, the abolition of slavery. But how many years are we away from the Civil War? 150 years away from the Civil War? In the great expanse of time, that's a twinkling of the eye, too. We're not so far away from slavery that we can say that slavery's legacy is not very much with us. Now, we can be frustrated at that, and we should be, but the struggle has always been there, and the struggle continues, and the struggle will go on.

00:39:36:00

SEAN WILENTZ:

Again, when I think about where the United States was, say, in 1880, when I think of where slavery was in 1903, when Dr. Du Bois published *The Souls of Black Folk*. Imagine what America was in 1903 ... To see us a century later where we are, that, and again, I take the long view, that's a fairly brief period of time. Of course, I'm getting older now, so that it all seems to be a briefer period of time. But nevertheless, for all of the torture and the heartbreak and the sorrow, and for all the grotesquery of history in that period, the arc of the moral universe has been going more or less in the right direction, it seems to me, but it has only done it through struggle. Believe me, there have been setbacks. Revolutions can go backwards. We've seen that happen plenty of times, most pointedly at the end of the Civil War.

Joshua Giddings

00:40:36:00

SEAN WILENTZ:

Joshua Giddings from Ohio was a fascinating character in all of this story. He was a congressman from Ohio. He was an evangelical Christian, very religious man, going back to the Second Great Awakening, and was deeply anti-slavery. In the early 1840s, he gets in trouble with his own party, with the Whig Party. He's there in the House. There had been a revolt on a ship called the Creole, led by a cook named Madison Washington. Can you imagine an enslaved man named Madison Washington? Now, that's only in America, right? He comes up in the House with a proposal defending, basically, the Creole Rebellion. Well, you can imagine what the response to that was. Not just from southerners, but from his own Ohio Whig party. They basically cast him out. He is thrown out of the House of Representatives. He goes back to Ashtabula – I think that's where he is from, Ashtabula – and he gets re-elected. His people are as anti-slavery is he is, and they send him right back. Getting to be this kind of a

hero among the anti-slavery Whigs in the early 1840s, precisely with the Creole. He's doing a lot more than that, but that's emblematic.

Lincoln in Congress

00:41:59:00

SEAN WILENTZ:

In 1846, Abraham Lincoln gets elected to the Congress from Illinois. He goes to Washington. He's trying to figure out where is he going to live? Because in those days, congressmen lived in boarding houses. They didn't live in fancy digs. They live in boarding houses. He actually had Mary Todd Lincoln with him at that point. I think she just decided to get out of there. She didn't want to hang around Washington too much longer. But he gravitates to a boarding house owned by a woman named Anna Spriggs. It's right near where the Supreme Court is now, right behind the Capitol, right? They can walk to work.

SEAN WILENTZ:

Well, Anna Spriggs's boarding house was also known as "Abolition House." It's where Joshua Giddings was located, among others. While everybody in there was not a Joshua Giddings, and some, actually, there were some southerners in there as well, there's some border state people, at any rate, in there as well. But it had a reputation of being a pretty solid anti-slavery place. Theodore Dwight Weld, the great abolitionists, hung out at Abolition House. It was pretty notorious.

SEAN WILENTZ:

That's where Abraham Lincoln decides he's going to mess. That's where he's going to board. These are going to be his mess mates. From very early on, and Lincoln befriends Giddings, and he gets it. He's not Joshua Giddings at this point. He's not a big abolitionist. He's not going to be. He's from central

Illinois. He's not going to kill off his ... His people would not have re-elected him as Giddings's people re-elected him in 1843, 1844.

SEAN WILENTZ:

But he's sympathetic. He's sympathetic. While he's in Congress, actually, gravitating to Abolition House was one sign of all of this. He certainly opposes the Mexican War. He stands up and says, takes the anti-slavery Whig position, Northern Whig position on the war, which is that this is an unjust war that had been started by the President of the United States, James K. Polk. He demanded to know the exact spot where American soldiers had been fired upon that was supposedly the cause of the war. He got the nickname Spotty Lincoln on that account, which was not the nicest nickname to have, but it was done in the cause of opposing the Mexican War, alongside another congressman, the man I was mentioning earlier, John Quincy Adams, who had also opposed the war, ferociously.

SEAN WILENTZ:

Lincoln supports a provision called the Wilmot Proviso in 1846, '47, '48, which was going to make sure that any lands obtained in the Mexican War were going to be free of slavery. It was a Northwest Ordinance – going back to the 1780s – a Northwest Ordinance for these new lands. Strong anti-slavery that, really, a flashpoint in anti-slavery politics. Again, showing that you could not keep slavery out anymore. It was there on the floor of the House. Lincoln says he must've voted for the Wilmot Proviso, I don't know, a dozen times or something. That was an exaggeration, it only got voted on five or six times. But nevertheless, he voted for it.

00:45:16:00

SEAN WILENTZ:

Then, he proposes something, which I think historians have not given him quite the credit he's due, which is that he proposes a gradual emancipation plan for Washington D.C. Now, it doesn't get very far. It doesn't pass. However, this had been one of the great abolitionist causes in the 1830s. This was a radical idea, only 10 years earlier. This was something that the Congress is passing gag rules to keep out, keep petitions about this out of the debate. Actually, it goes back even further than that, as early as 1805, there was a guy, wonderful guy, who was anti-slavery guy, who was proposing to get rid of slavery in the District of Columbia.

SEAN WILENTZ:

Well, Lincoln picks up on that. That's an interesting convergence. Because here is this Illinois Whig who is anti-slavery but not that anti-slavery, but he's going to be putting forward this, what had been an emblematic abolitionist demand, he's putting it forward in the House when he does. These are all signs that ... Ralph Waldo Emerson said of Walt Whitman that his great career, which began with *Leaves of Grass*, must have had a long foreground someplace. This is Abraham Lincoln's long foreground, in terms of anti-slavery politics. You can take it all the way back to the 1830s, actually, in Illinois. It's not the forefront of his politics, but it's there in his politics, so that you can see, you can understand why, in 1854, coming after the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850, but in 1854 with Kansas-Nebraska, there's no question what side Abraham Lincoln is going to be on.

The rise of the Republican Party and Lincoln

00:47:05:00

SEAN WILENTZ:

Well, by 1860, the Republican Party has emerged as a power. It was the second party. After the Whigs fell apart, it was unclear who was going to succeed the Whig Party. For a while, it looked as if it might be the Nativists. There was a Nativist movement that had gotten going in the 1850s. Actually, it was earlier, but it really gets going in the 1850s. They establish something that was known as the Know-Nothing Party. In 1856, they nominate former President Millard Fillmore for the presidency.

SEAN WILENTZ:

There were a lot of people who thought, well, the Whigs are gone, now the Nativists are going to take over. They were called the Native Americans, not to be confused with the Native Americans that we referred to, but that's where they called themselves. But then there were the anti-slavery people as well, the so-called anti-Nebraska faction that was many Whigs, some Democrats and the old Liberty Party and Free Soil Party. There was a contention as to what was going to supplant the Whig Party.

SEAN WILENTZ:

In the end, it was the Republicans. The Know-Nothings are not going to be able to become a sectional force, let alone a national force. The Republicans, however, do become the successor to the Whig Party, and they are a sectional force. Abraham Lincoln does not appear on the ballot in large parts of the South. He's just not there. The Republican Party does not exist. But it was an extraordinary coalition. Lincoln himself, as late as 1855, is still wondering where he is going to go. There's no Whig Party left. Where is he going to go? He's not quite sure. He ends up going in with the Republicans.

SEAN WILENTZ:

Now, in 1858, Lincoln had made quite a name for himself and made quite a name for the Republican Party in his race against Stephen Douglas for the US

Senator from Illinois. Lincoln and Douglas had been each other's nemeses for a very long time. They knew of each other very, very well by this point. They were both very ambitious men. Stephen A. Douglas was the absolute incarnation of the pro-slavery or the pro-Southern Democrats.

SEAN WILENTZ:

He was a racist of the highest order. When you read his speeches now, and every time you see the word Negro, that's not the word he said in that speech. He was unabashed in his racism. He did not believe that slavery was a terribly important moral issue. He ran for the Senate on the platform, the idea of popular sovereignty. That is to say that the people who are out in the territories ought to be able to decide for themselves whether slavery would be there or not.

SEAN WILENTZ:

Lincoln took the other view, which was precisely that the United States government, the Congress in particular, had the power to keep slavery out of the territories and ought to do so, and had a duty to do so. That's the position of the Republican Party in 1856, and they ran very well in 1856, but Lincoln helps to bring those politics to the forefront with those great debates against Douglas in 1858.

SEAN WILENTZ:

He loses the election, in part because the legislature was basically ... There was a gerrymandering, basically. The old legislative districts kicked in. He got the most votes, but he didn't win the election. Sound familiar? But he made a great impression. Here was this westerner, this western Republican, who was standing up to maybe the leading Democrat outside of the president, Stephen A. Douglas, and giving him a run for his money, and making the Republican argument as eloquently and as powerfully as anybody had to this point.

The Republican Party has come a very long way in a very short time. It had been born in 1854 in the aftermath of the Kansas-Nebraska Act. By 1856, it does run a presidential candidate, John C. Frémont. But by 1860, it's contending for national power in no uncertain terms. It is thought that whoever the Republican nominee would be in 1860 would stand a very, very good chance of winning the election.

00:51:25:00

SEAN WILENTZ:

A guy named John Brown messes that up for the Republicans at the last minute, because it looks like maybe the Republicans aren't going to be so popular. But they managed to do so. But it was very much Lincoln's doing, I think, again. Had Lincoln not gotten the nomination in 1860, I'm not altogether sure that the Republicans would have won that election.

SEAN WILENTZ:

William Seward, the leading contender besides Lincoln for the nomination, the person that everybody thought was going to get the nomination was William H. Seward from New York, who had had a longstanding anti-slavery career, a very distinguished one. He'd given a very powerful speech, actually, saying that there was a higher law than the Constitution. He was misconstrued in all of that, but he was thought of as a real radical on the anti-slavery question. Much more radical than Lincoln was thought to be.

SEAN WILENTZ:

And this is just a guess – I'm a historian, I'm not a prognosticator – but my guess is that if Seward had won the nomination, he might've had a very difficult time carrying what we think of as the lower North, that is to say Pennsylvania, even parts of New York, Illinois, Indiana. I'm not so sure that they would've gone for Seward. It took Lincoln to keep them in the

Republican Party. If Stephen A. Douglas had somehow won those votes and had somehow managed to eke out a victory, well, then, all of American history would have looked very, very different. I think that Lincoln's nomination was really, very important.

SEAN WILENTZ:

I don't want to go on record saying that it would have happened. I don't know – it's a who knows. But let's put it this way. Lincoln's winning the nomination, and it's still going to be hard for the Republicans to win that lower North. Nevertheless, it was much more possible for them to do so with Lincoln as the nominee than Seward as the nominee. I'd put it that way. So that, while there was no guarantee either way, Lincoln's nomination was really important.

The Lincoln-Douglas Debates

00:53:37:00

SEAN WILENTZ:

Abe Lincoln, look, he's six foot four. He looks kind of gawky. There are those who say he comes right out of P.T. Barnum, he's kind of freaky looking. He himself says this all the time. People have accused him of being two-faced, he said. He says, if you had a face like mine ... He would make fun of his own looks. Lincoln, when he spoke, either in the debates or even when he was giving the speech, people describe him as, he would begin the speech looking awkward and not necessarily all that comfortable and didn't look great in his clothes, necessarily. He had a very high-pitched voice. It's was not a stentorian voice like this. It was not a politician's voice. It was high pitched and squeaky, like this.

SEAN WILENTZ:

But he did have an ability, which was, he could throw his voice very far. He was able to reach the back of a crowd. Remember, there's no microphones. This is 1858. What you've got is what you've got. He had an ability to project his voice to the very back of a crowd about as well as anybody. He learned this as a lawyer in part. He had that ability, so that even in his squeakiness, he could still be heard and understood. But people describe him as starting off disheveled. Then, suddenly, he would warm to his subject and a glow would come upon him. He would be able to pull people in. This ugly rube from Illinois suddenly became charismatic, people said. You were drawn to him by the way that he spoke. By the calmness, by the clarity of his logic. This was the late Lincoln. Early Lincoln was something of a slasher. He could really take you apart if he wanted to. There's some of that in the Lincoln-Douglas debates.

SEAN WILENTZ:

Douglas, on the other hand, is like a bulldog. Douglas is short and he's called the little giant. He barks as much as he speaks. He uses racist terms all the time. He's vindictive, he's nasty, in a way that Lincoln is not. Lincoln can be witty and cutting, but he's not going to be attacking Stephen A. Douglas in the way that Douglas is attacking him. Very different style. Very different style, which, Douglas' supporters loved it. They thought of him as a real man, he's a tough guy. But Lincoln had a way of dominating the debates, especially once you got out of the Deep South part of the state, out of what was called Egypt. In the southern part of state, which is mostly settled by refugees from the South. Once you got up further north, he had the ability to turn Douglas' logic inside out.

SEAN WILENTZ:

Douglas had a problem in 1858. It seems very abstruse now, but it was basically that he supported the Dred Scott decision, even though the Dred

Scott decision basically had nullified popular sovereignty. His view was popular sovereignty. You could not own them both, but he tried. He tried to square the circle. Lincoln was absolutely devastating, because he had this clear, logical, Euclidean mind, but he had the ability to express that Euclidean mind in ways that really undercut, or cut Douglas to the quick. Not to say that Douglas was ever undone by all of this, he had his tricks. But Lincoln certainly stood up to him.

SEAN WILENTZ:

And don't forget, Stephen A. Douglas had been in the Senate for a long time. Lincoln was this ex-congressman one-termer. He was a nobody, quote-unquote. The fact that he was able to take on one of the great men of the Democratic Party, perhaps the greatest man of the Northern Democratic Party, and fight him to that standstill. Well, it not only made his name, but it made Republican politics more powerful, more popular than they had ever had been before.

Lincoln's style of speaking

00:57:54:00

SEAN WILENTZ:

Lincoln was not glib. You know what I'm saying? He wouldn't necessarily have been really great on TV, necessarily for example. He was a very thoughtful person. He prepared for his speeches. He prepared each... He studied. He did a dissertation's amount of work behind some of his speeches. The Cooper Institute speech in 1860, which is one of his most important, he really worked on that for a very long time beforehand. So when you say his speeches, his speeches reflect that kind of careful thoughtfulness that he brought to everything, but it certainly brought it to his politics and he certainly brought it to... Well, he brought to his presidency, but he brought it

to his politics. So yeah, I think that, again, the logic, the clarity, but also the information that he had to hand, this was Lincoln, the lawyer in terms of preparation, but also in some ways, I wouldn't call him a scholar exactly, but he was extremely well-prepared and you see that in the speeches as well. It's the combination of careful preparation and lucidity.

SEAN WILENTZ:

I mean, when you read a Lincoln speech, you're not left mystified as to what the man just said, you know exactly what he just said. And that's an art. That's not that easy. Now, you read the Lincoln-Douglas debates, which is a different kind of thing and he'll have his prepared remarks, then it'll be about the cut and thrust of politics and he's very good at that too. Lincoln's a politician, and you have to understand him as a politician at every moment along the way, and that means being able to react as well as being able to attack. He could do that very well.

SEAN WILENTZ:

But what I think makes Lincoln really stand apart is the care with which he went about his thinking. He would not come to a quick decision about something. He thought long and hard. He wasn't... I don't want to make it sound like he's a doofus. I mean he's not slow in the way... There's a deliberation. He has got a deliberate mind as well as an elegant mind. He's got a... Yes, a deliberate mind, as well as an elegant mind.

Understanding Lincoln's political strategy

01:00:41:00

SEAN WILENTZ:

William Herndon, his law partner, once said that Abraham Lincoln was a little engine of ambition that knew no rest. Yes, that's true. But in terms of his

public statements, he's always political, and this leads a lot of people to misunderstand what Lincoln is talking about. I think John Hay actually said at some point that unless you understand the context of what Lincoln is saying, unless you understand what is going on around what he is saying, you can never really understand Abraham Lincoln. So if you take him out of context, as lots of historians will want to do, you will misunderstand what he's talking about. Abraham Lincoln has outwitted just about as many American historians as he has politicians of his own day, precisely because people don't necessarily understand him as a politician, as a political leader.

SEAN WILENTZ:

For example, the most famous example is the 1862 response to Horace Greeley, where Greeley is very, they're very impatient with Lincoln for not having come up with an Emancipation Proclamation, and not doing enough to turn the war into a war against slavery. It's still a war for the Union, and it's not turned yet into a war against slavery. So Greeley publishes this editorial in the *Daily Tribune*, “The Prayer of the 20 Million,” I think it's called, attacking Lincoln, criticizing him for not having moved faster. And Lincoln responds with a response, with a very careful response, which makes him sound very conservative. He says, "Look, if I could save the Union by freeing all the slaves, I would do it. If I could I save the Union by freeing none of the slaves I would do it. If I could save the Union by freeing all of the slaves, I could do it, but I'm here to save the Union." So everybody thinks, wow, really a conservative.

SEAN WILENTZ:

Well, what people didn't know was that he was already drafting the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, that he was in a political situation where he knew he was going to have to prepare more conservative northerners for the fact that he was about to deliver this thing, that the

political context he was in, he wasn't being conservative, he was being political. Now you can say there are those of us who think that being political is a terribly immoral thing. Well, that may be true unless you're a politician and unless you're a president, and if you're a president, you have no choice but to do that, if you want to get anything done.

SEAN WILENTZ:

So this is one example of all of that. There are many examples like that, where what Lincoln says has a meaning that's not exactly what people imagine it was at the time and not exactly what historians have imagined that it was since. And, again, historians write about politics a lot, but they don't necessarily understand politics, and it took me a long time to figure this out myself, but being a little bit more around politics. Politics is sometimes called the "art of the possible." Well, I guess that's true. But there's an art to that art that I think a lot of historians don't understand. It's much more artistic. It's much more creative. It's much more powerful. And it's an art that many of us just don't get. Lincoln exemplifies that. FDR was the same in many ways, I think of the two of them as of American presidents, well, and Jefferson could be that way too, actually, often speaking by indirection, telling you what he thought you heard – it turns out to be nothing really about what he was saying, or was strategic rather than didactic.

Lincoln's anti-slavery origins

01:04:49:00

SEAN WILENTZ:

Lincoln comes out of a part of Kentucky where the Baptist church was actually very strong, and it was an anti-slavery Baptist church. People forget, it was probably more anti-slavery, organized anti-slavery, in the border states at the time that Lincoln was a young man, 1810, 1820, than there was in the

North. And the Methodists, the Baptists in particular had a very strong anti-slavery animus. That was all going to go. That was all going to disappear by the time he got to the 1840s and 50s. But earlier on in the 19th century, it was pretty strong.

SEAN WILENTZ:

Indeed, many of the migrants who start off in the border states like Kentucky, who end up in Illinois, Indiana, Illinois, were relatively, I don't want to say poor, but they were not rich, middle-class? That's not the right word. They were farmers who wanted to get away from slavery as much as anything else. Now, they just thought that it was a disgusting institution and they didn't want to be living amidst it. They also didn't like the fact that there were slave holders who were running the show. They just wanted to get away from all of that. And Lincoln's family was like that. So they ended up in Indiana and then in Illinois.

SEAN WILENTZ:

Does it take? Abraham Lincoln is not a Baptist. Abraham Lincoln is sort of something of a free-thinker, actually, and this is part of his growth, his evolution. As a young man, he's reading Thomas Payne and people like that. And he never becomes a conventional Christian actually, despite the fact that many have tried to make him into such a thing, despite the fact that he mobilizes religious speech and particularly King James Bible, as effectively as anybody in American history has. Despite all of that, and he went to church, but he was never a particularly believing Christian. So he didn't buy the Baptist part of all of that. But I think that when he said that he was naturally antislavery, I think that that's part of it and it goes all the way back to his youth in Kentucky, amidst the anti-slavery Baptists.

SEAN WILENTZ:

There are many stories of Lincoln seeing coffles of slaves on his trips down the Mississippi as a river boatman and so forth, and they're true, but I don't think there was a moment where the scales suddenly fell from Abraham Lincoln's eyes, where he was one thing and then all of a sudden he discovered that slavery was a terrible thing. And that's what I think he meant by all of that. I don't think he ever had an idea that slavery was an institution or a human relation or a form of oppression that he could abide, let alone something that he could support. So that's what I think happened. He didn't go through a pro-slavery or indifference to slavery then suddenly become anti-slavery. I think it was there from the beginning.

Lincoln's ambition

01:07:54:00

SEAN WILENTZ:

I mean, Abraham Lincoln is born in dirt. Abraham Lincoln comes up from... Let me back up. I didn't mean that because it wasn't dirt, but Abraham Lincoln came from shall we say a hardscrabble background. He was by no means a– he was not to the manor born, right? If there was a self-made man and an age of self-made men, Abraham Lincoln was one of them. So it took tremendous ambition for him to get even to the point where he was this successful lawyer in Springfield, Illinois.

SEAN WILENTZ:

So this was, I want to say it's all consuming, but I think that he knew that he was a cut above others, that he could make it in the world by dint of his brains. He could also make it on the basis of his brawn too. And he was no mean fighter, he could toss people pretty far. That was one of the reasons that he turned that to good political use, actually, his ability to fight, literally, to

wrestle, this showed, in a time where white guys are the soul of American democracy and tough white guys are maybe even more, well, he's a tough white guy. He can do that. He can play that game, but he's also this other figure. And so his ambition is extraordinary. His wife, Mary Todd Lincoln, said at some point, I believe, that she was going to marry the next president of the United States, or the man who would become president of the United States. Stephen Douglas actually courted her, so she made the right choice. But she knew an ambitious suitor when she saw one and Abraham Lincoln was certainly ambitious.

SEAN WILENTZ:

But the question of courage and ambition – I'm not sure that in American politics, one can be effectively courageous without ambition. I don't think that you can unleash that. I mean, I can be courageous, but unless I want to go somewhere, I'm being courageous – it's to no effect. So you have to combine that. You're certainly not going to get to high office, the highest offices in the land, without ambition. It's almost a given, I think. Now, ambition can sometimes occlude principle, can sometimes wipe principle out. If you're only ambitious, usually you end up as a person successful in your own time, who leaves very little of a mark on history. There's a million of them.

01:10:58:00

SEAN WILENTZ:

The thing about Lincoln was, he was, and I've written this, he was an egalitarian politician. Now that seems in many people's eyes, that's a oxymoron, that's a contradiction, right? How can you be an egalitarian and be a politician at the same time? Well you can and Lincoln was that, which is to say that he understood, he had very deep principles, which only deepened as he grew older, but he understood that they were going to get nowhere unless you were a politician as well, unless you're going to actually be able to wield

power. And you're only going to get to wield power if you are political. And he's the embodiment, actually, of that kind of egalitarian-political combination.

SEAN WILENTZ:

There are others. Just recently, my good friend, John Lewis, was like this. He had that combination of understanding how politics worked. He really, really did. It came through tragedy, it came hard. It was not necessarily something he was born to in Alabama, but he came to understand it. Of the people I've known in my lifetime, he came as close to that combination that I see in Lincoln, historically, as anybody I've ever seen. Of someone who could be just as egalitarian in the practice of his politics, but just as political in his pursuit of equality. That's something that John Lewis had and Abe Lincoln – very different men, very different people in many ways – but they had that in common.

Racism in Lincoln's early speeches

01:12:42:00

SEAN WILENTZ:

Lincoln comes out of Kentucky and he comes into Indiana and southern Illinois – the world there is, racist speech is everywhere. Racism was everywhere where I was growing up too. This is America we're talking about, but it's just sort of around. And so he's going to pick up on that, particularly when he's giving speeches to get elected, he's going to be flattering the crowd. And he knows out there that if you use certain words – they won't be objected to, they make you familiar to the crowd.

SEAN WILENTZ:

My favorite example, that's not my favorite example, but the worst example of this actually was a speech that he gave in 1852, in support of Winfield Scott. Which is not exactly what you think of, but it's the 1852 presidential election and he makes a kind of weird racialist, well it's not racist, but it is a racist remark, about Franklin Pierce of people, accusing Franklin Pierce of being a mulatto in effect in his politics. Now, you know that that's not the nastiest term, but it's pretty nasty, pretty ugly.

SEAN WILENTZ:

I think that after 1854, that really drops away in Lincoln's speech, it does drop away, because I think that it's a measure of how slavery has taken over American politics so that…. And now I don't want to exaggerate his racism beforehand. I mean, it's there, it's not the forefront of his politics by any means, he's not a racist politician in the way that Stephen Douglas was, and in fact, if you want to get the measure of Lincoln's anti-racism match him up against Stephen Douglas and you'll see it right away. So, as you said Jackie, it's casual, it's that kind of what white guys said in those days if you are from Illinois, but never at the forefront of what he was talking about. Even in the 1830s, for example, in the Illinois state legislature, when the legislature wants to essentially beat the abolitionists, for example, and do so in ways that are pretty racist, he does not go along with that. He does not, he doesn't see that.

SEAN WILENTZ:

So when it comes to the core of the principle of the matter, that's not part of his lexicon, but he is of the time and the place that he's from. And it would be interesting to go back and look at everyday political speech, I'm sure scholars have and I just haven't read it, what everyday speech was like among white men in those parts of the country or any part of the country for that matter. It's casualness, in fact, might be the measure of its relative unimportance in

trying to understand the man. In Springfield, for example, people don't realize this, there were a lot of Black families in Springfield, Illinois in the 1840s and into the 1850s. In fact, right by, his neighbor – he does not live in the fancy-fancy part of town, he's got a nice house, he's got a good lawyer's house – but there are Black people coming in and out of that neighborhood. In that neighborhood, his neighbors, he's got Black neighbors, and there's no sense of him being uncomfortable, being in any way upset by this. This struck him as normal.

01:16:14:00

SEAN WILENTZ:

So I think that in understanding Lincoln's relationship to Black people, those references, I think, are not, particularly indicative of him. And then later on, of course, when he does befriend Frederick Douglass, when Sojourner Truth does come to the White House, they're struck by the fact that – people talk about fragility, that white people can't talk to Black people, it's a difficult thing – they're struck in fact by how open and honest and unbothered he was by the fact of race. And this is in 1862, 63, 64, it's a very different America than we have today.

SEAN WILENTZ:

So I'm not making him out to be some sort of paragon of virtue of any kind, but I do think that Lincoln's... See where Lincoln was from, and you get a sense of where he ended up, and I think that that's important. That's not to say that… He evolved, he didn't have to go through these sudden changes that I think some historians think that he went through. I don't think there were two Lincolns. I think there was one Lincoln. The Lincoln that you saw at the end was the Lincoln that you began with, but it's a person who's evolved.

The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850

01:17:37:00

SEAN WILENTZ:

As part of the Compromise of 1850, Congress passes a Fugitive Slave Act, which is the most draconian of its kind. And there had been an earlier one in 1793 and it basically turns the entire North into a slave patrol. It says that you'll be fined, you will be punished if you do not help to run down fugitive slaves. Now this went far beyond what the Constitution called for, but it was constitutional, you see. It was not something that was clearly unconstitutional, it was just bad policy in Lincoln's terms. Now, the reaction to the Fugitive Slave Act in the North is ferocious. There are any number of incidents in the North where fugitive slaves were supposed to be brought back or rescued or protected by anti-slavery northerners. In some cases, scooted up to Canada, gotten away, taken away.

SEAN WILENTZ:

There was a very famous incident in 1854 where an escaped slave named Anthony Burns was tracked down in Boston and was supposed to be returned to the South. And there was a huge hue and cry in Boston of all places, which is kind of the center of radical abolitionism, and the president of the United States, Franklin Pierce, actually had to call up federal troops to accompany this one man, to make sure that this one man was taken back to the South into slavery. And those troops did indeed march Anthony Burns to the docks, but the streets were filled with people protesting, filled with people protesting. So the Fugitive Slave Act, it gave birth to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the most important anti-slavery piece of writing probably in the entire period.

SEAN WILENTZ:

What was Lincoln's reaction? Lincoln's reaction was "This is a terrible thing. I don't like the Fugitive Slave Act, but it's constitutional. It's not unconstitutional. There is that Fugitive Slave Clause in the Constitution. I respect the Constitution." And this is important to understand– any understanding of Lincoln is reverence for both the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States.

SEAN WILENTZ:

And he says, “We can't say that it's unconstitutional now. We’ve got to get rid of it. We've got to elect people who are going to get rid of it. But I cannot stand with you on this.” And he disappointed a lot of anti-slavery people. That's one of the reasons why Wendell Phillips, the great abolitionist, later on was to refer to Abraham Lincoln as the “slave hound of Illinois.” “The slave hound of Illinois” because he was willing to go along with the constitutional character of the Fugitive Slave Act.

SEAN WILENTZ:

Now, this is again, getting back to Lincoln as politician. It's also Lincoln as statesman. And understanding that he thought that the Constitution of the United States was a great thing, and that the Constitution of the United States did have anti-slavery potential. Indeed he devotes an entire speech at Cooper Union explaining why the Constitution of the United States had this great anti-slavery potential. And he did not want to see the Constitution of the United States undone. If getting rid of slavery meant getting rid of the Constitution of the United States, well, what are we going to be left with? We wouldn't be left with a country. We would have been left with chaos, or we could have been left with a monarchy and who knows what direction that would have gone in, because they always said that slavery was the instantiation of the divine right of kings anyway.

01:21:27:00

SEAN WILENTZ:

So he didn't see that as a solution, he saw that as a setback. He also believed that the Declaration of Independence was organically connected with the Constitution and he believed that the line that "we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal" – that was at the core of his political beliefs. And he believed that that was instantiated in the Constitution. And when you read the preamble of the Constitution, you can understand why. So going back to the Fugitive Slave Act, his understanding of the Constitution was that it wasn't unconstitutional. People misunderstood what he was talking about. People thought that he was soft on the Fugitive Slave Act. He wasn't soft on the Fugitive Slave Act, he was strong on the Constitution. And he had to try to find a way to get rid of slavery without getting rid of the Constitution. Now, the southern slaveholders wouldn't let him do that, because they seceded. He gets elected in a democratic election and they won't let him go about it the way that he thought it could be gotten done, because they saw the writing on the wall. They knew very well what he was up to, he and his party.

Lincoln's misunderstood anti-slavery commitment

01:22:43:00

SEAN WILENTZ:

I think Lincoln gets misunderstood because people think that his devotion is to the Union rather than to getting rid of slavery. People think that his devotion is to the Constitution, rather than to getting rid of slavery. He's devoted to both. He's devoted to both. When the southern secession comes, he realizes that he can't do anything about slavery until the Union is restored. There's no way for him to do anything about slavery until the Union is restored. That's why it's the number one thing. Now, does that mean that this is a war that doesn't care about slavery? No, he was elected on a platform to

get rid of slavery. Now, when he talks about the Union, as it was, that means the Union, as it was with me elected to get rid of slavery.

SEAN WILENTZ:

But he couldn't fight that war, or rather he couldn't go about getting rid of slavery or starting to putting slavery, as he put it, in the course of ultimate extinction, until he saved the Union. That's what he thought. So it's not an either or, or it's not a one rather than the other, the two were always there in his mind. The reason that the South seceded wasn't that they didn't like the Union, it's because they wanted to keep slavery, and they saw Abraham Lincoln and his party attacking slavery. And they say so, they say, that's why we're out of here, done. They weren't paranoid. They saw what was on the line. But Lincoln understood that if he was going to pursue his anti-slavery agenda – what he'd been elected to do, was not immediate emancipation by any means, it was going to be under the Constitution, but he was going to do it – that he had to save the Union.

SEAN WILENTZ:

It was only as the war continued that he realized that he couldn't save the Union without the Emancipation Proclamation. And a lot had happened in 1861, 62. But by the end of 1862 he's clear that no, this is not the right choice now, it's not a matter of saving the Union or to get rid of slavery. I'm going to have to emancipate. I'm going to have to proclaim emancipation, if I want to save the Union. Things kind of flipped. But that's all the dynamic of the war. That's the dynamic of what happened with him that I think is terribly misunderstood, in part because there are as many representations of Abraham Lincoln in history as there were political representations of Abraham Lincoln in his own lifetime.

SEAN WILENTZ:

There are neo-confederate versions of Abraham Lincoln, there are neo-copperhead versions of Lincoln, there are neo-Garrisonian versions of Lincoln, all of which give you a view of Lincoln, but it's not necessarily Lincoln. Now I'm not saying that you should take the Lincolnian view of Lincoln. What I'm trying to say is that they are partial. And on this thing in particular, the idea that the Union was all important to him and slavery was not, why would he have even run for president as a Republican? Why when all these compromises are being proposed to save the Union, save the Union in 1860, 61, after he's elected, there's all these compromise proposals – the Crittenden Compromise, this compromise, that compromise, save the Union, save the Union – he says, no.

01:26:15:00

SEAN WILENTZ:

He says the tug must come here. Slavery will be stopped from going into the territories, full stop. That's it. No compromise. Now that was about slavery. That was the way he thought that slavery was going to eventually come to an end. It wasn't the express, it was the local, okay but we were on that train.

He was principled about that. Absolutely. In a way that many Republicans were not. He was absolutely principled about that. So from the beginning, though the Civil War was always a war about slavery, the question was, how are you going to get there? And in Lincoln's mind, a dissevered Union could not be tolerated. But it was a dissevered Union that was going to be put back together again, so that he could then go about doing what he could to get rid of slavery. The neo-Garrisonian view doesn't agree with that. Although by the end of the war, Garrison did, which is sort of interesting because by the end of the war, Garrison and Lincoln have actually converged and Garrison kind of sees the point. Garrison actually supports Lincoln for reelection in 1864, which a lot of the abolitionists, many of the abolitionists did not. So it's

interesting that Garrison's latter day admirers don't always see what Garrison himself saw.

SEAN WILENTZ:

But these are the politics of the 1850s, going into the 1860s, the politics of the war. And unless we understand the anti-slavery origins of the Civil War, that there really were anti-slavery origins to the Civil War. Slavery didn't cause the civil war. Institutions don't cause wars. Slavery didn't cause it. Anti-slavery caused the Civil War. Slavery had been around, as we said before, for thousands of years. Anti-slavery was the new thing. That was the challenge. And it was kind of there during the Revolution, but then it got buried, then it got pushed aside, but it came back. And, it came back to the point where in 1860 it won national power. This was extraordinary, but that's why the war happened.

SEAN WILENTZ:

The war didn't happen because of slavery. The war happened because Abraham… The war did not come about because of slavery. The war came about because Abraham Lincoln was elected President of the United States. That's why the war happened. That's why secession happened. And then, the war came after. And, that's the anti-slavery cause of the Civil War, because Abraham Lincoln, by 1861, embodied the anti-slavery cause. Not every anti-slavery person agreed with that. There are always divisions, but in terms of national power, that was very true. And by misunderstanding that, we not only misunderstand Abraham Lincoln, but we misunderstand the central event in American history, if we get that wrong.

Secession and the Confederate States of America

01:29:42:00

SEAN WILENTZ:

Lincoln is elected in November, 1860 and by December 20th, the state of South Carolina has declared its secession from the Union. Then a number of other lower South states leave. Texas leaves pretty quickly. Mississippi leaves pretty quickly. It's a bigger fight in Georgia, actually. There's something of a fight in Louisiana, but the lower South goes out first. But the border states, in Virginia in particular, it's not altogether clear that they're going to join the South Carolinians. The South Carolinians, going back to the 1830s under Andrew Jackson during the nullification crisis, when they try to nullify a tariff, they were the only ones who were for nullification. And the rest of the South kind of said, "Well, we kind of admire you, but we're not going to go along with this craziness." Well, there was some of that going on in 1860, 61 as well, where there was actually a lot of thought in the South at that point, that in fact the South was better off in the Union than out of the Union. What does that mean? Well, what it meant is this. Okay, Abraham Lincoln just got elected president. Yep. What can he possibly do? He hasn't even got a full majority in the Congress. He's got a plurality, but he hasn't got... What can he possibly do? Let's suppose in two years we just get rid of the Republicans in Congress and then in four years, Abraham Lincoln will be gone and it'll be a one-term president, and the South will come back again. Why do we have to go through all the secession? We're better off. If we're out of the Union, then all kinds of things can happen, like the Emancipation Proclamation.

SEAN WILENTZ:

So, there was a lot of feeling in the South in 1860 that they should not secede. The lower South less. The Fire-Eaters, the secessionists, were much more powerful. But it took a while. It was really Fort Sumter that changed things. I mean, once the Confederates, once the South Carolinians fire upon Fort Sumter and then Lincoln calls for 75,000 volunteers to go and crush the rebellion, well then, then, then the die is cast. And then the border South is going to come in too – not all of the border South though, like Kentucky,

which is going to be fought over. And it's going to be a source of great political difficulty for Lincoln, right through the war. So not all of the border South goes out, but Virginia does. And that's a big deal.

01:32:13:00

SEAN WILENTZ:

When the South secedes, the States go out individually, but then they form a nation. They form the Confederate States of America. And this is in Montgomery, Alabama, and eventually the capital's going to move to Richmond, but they form a nation. They're not simply going to be 11 States on their own, right? They had fight a war. That became clearer early on, but no, I mean, Jefferson Davis is named the president and they formed their own constitution. It's interesting, the Confederate constitution. The Confederate constitution reads almost word for word like the American Constitution, the US Constitution, with some very important differences. One thing, they put God in, which is a measure of what religion was like in the South. God appears in the Confederate revolution – in the Confederate constitution. But at every point where the Framers made it clear that slavery was not going to be acknowledged in national law, that Confederate constitution makes slavery part of the national law of the Confederacy, and all the language changes and all those things that were done to keep slavery out in 1787, the Confederates put back in in 1861.

SEAN WILENTZ:

It's kind of a difficult thing to start a nation on the basis of state's rights. I mean, you're going to be getting into problems when your entire politics has been based, or at least in part has been based, on the idea that state rights should resist the encroachments of the federal government, which had been there from at least the nullification crisis on, which meant that there're going to be all sorts of tensions between state officials and indeed local officials and

the Confederate government in Richmond, and it was going to be very unstable in many respects. It was also a government that had, it was a politics rather, that was very odd in many respects, from the American standpoint. It had no political parties. Abraham Lincoln, as president of the United States, still had to contend with the South, that is contend with the Confederates, but it also contend with the Democratic party, which is full of people who hated his guts, called him a gorilla, called him a N-word lover, all the rest of it.

SEAN WILENTZ:

But it existed. It meant that political conflict was going to continue. Now, at one level that meant that the Constitution was not going to come undone, that American politics is going to be able to continue, we were stronger. We don't have to suppress, even though he did a little bit of that, but we're going to be able to have an election in 1864.

01:34:51:00

SEAN WILENTZ:

They had elections in the South where it was kind of like elections in the old Soviet Union. I mean, you kind of knew who was going to win and you kind of knew that the person was going to win by 95% or something like that. There were no political parties. There was no political conflict, which meant that conflict could not be contained. In the United States, one of the functions of parties is to actually let conflict happen, but it happens in a way that's not going to threaten the government itself.

SEAN WILENTZ:

One side is going to win or the other side's going to win, but there's been a fight. The fight's been allowed to happen. When you don't have that, then you're going to get all kinds of internal turmoil, which is one of the reasons that the Confederacy found itself in difficulty. You had state governors, like

Joe Brown in Georgia, who weren't going to listen to Jefferson Davis. You had generals who weren't particularly going to listen to Jefferson Davis. It was not as stable a government as the United States of America proved to be, but that was foundering in part on its contradictions.

SEAN WILENTZ:

It's also difficult to run a war as a slave society against a free society that's there, because you, at one time, at one level, you have to fight off the enemy that's invading, but you also have to make sure that your slaves at home aren't going to come up and aren't going to run away, as many did, or are not going to fight against you too. You have to fight on two fronts, kind of thing. I mean, they managed to do that, but it was a fright.

SEAN WILENTZ:

The slaveholders had always been terrified at the prospect of slave insurrection. And there's an argument to be made that in some ways that's exactly what happened. I mean, it wasn't a slave insurrection in the Toussaint-Louverture sense, in the Haiti sense. It wasn't similar to what John Brown was thinking about it. It wasn't even what David Walker was talking about. But there were runaways, and they did help the Union cause, and there's 180,000 Black soldiers enlisted in the Union Army, many of them, most of them I believe, are former slaves. That has a lot to do with guaranteeing the Union victory.

SEAN WILENTZ:

So you can say, in a way, that that all came true, but they're terrified throughout the antebellum period that the North is going to come in and instigate a gigantic Haitian-like revolution. It showed that the inconsistencies of the slaveholders' idea that slavery was just wonderful, that the slaves just

loved it, at the same time they're worried about getting the throats slit half the time. I mean, which is it?

The beginning of Civil War

01:37:24:00

SEAN WILENTZ:

Lincoln takes office on March 4th, 1861. And when you read the first inaugural, you see that he's still hoping to convince the seceding states to give up, to stop. He's trying to convince them, "I'm not going to do anything about slavery were it currently exists. You have nothing to worry about me. Everything that the Fire-Eaters are telling you is wrong. Come on back, come on back." He's bidding them to come back. And Lincoln actually believed that he could succeed. Actually, I think Lincoln overestimated the pro Unionist sentiment in the South. But he certainly wasn't going to declare war on the South simply because they'd left. So the northern public opinion was – what shall we say? – it wasn't that it was confused. Well, the situation was confusing. A war had not been declared. A war – it was going to take Fort Sumter to do that. Now, once Fort Sumter is fired upon… the passive voice – once the Confederates fire on Fort Sumter, then northern opinion really does shift in a different direction. Then, they have fired on the flag of the United States. This now becomes a rallying cry, and there is a great hue and cry in the North of young men signing up to fight in the war against the traitors.

SEAN WILENTZ:

This is one of the reasons why it's, again, thought about as a war for the Union, which it was, because people are rallying to try to save the country against these crazy slaveholders who have done something really dastardly, which is to secede. And, we cannot let that happen. There are plenty of

abolitionists who are there. They're all for doing it. They're all for going to war, though it took a little while for some of the abolitionists to come along about that.

SEAN WILENTZ:

But Northern public opinion is really out to try to crush this rebellion against the United States. They referred to it interestingly – the Civil War has many names, right? There's the Civil War. There's "the war between the states" – that's the southern version, right? There's the "war of northern aggression" – that's the super southern version. The northern version that was actually popular at the time was the "war of the slaveholders' rebellion." "The war of the slaveholders' rebellion." I once lived in a little town, upstate New York, in Tivoli, New York, and there's a monument to the brave men of Tivoli and the surrounding towns who had fallen to crush the "slaveholders' rebellion." That's what it was called. "rebellion" was crucial to all that. They had rebelled. They were rebels against the American Republic. We have to stop them, but there was never any doubt who was behind it. This was the slaveholders' rebellion they were going after.

SEAN WILENTZ:

And, I think that in the course of the war, and you can see this in the soldiers' letters, actually, "slaveholders" begins to overtake "rebellion". They're both there from the beginning, but where people might've been leaning a little bit more on the rebellion side, by the time were getting to 1864 beginning to talk about the slaveholder side. Both are always there. It's neither the one or the other. So, I think northern public opinion does go through that process, much as it had since the 1830s on slavery itself. Abraham Lincoln did not sweep the North on being neutral about slavery. He was anti-slavery, and he won that election fair and square, in the North tremendously. It's not as if people were disposed to be neutral on the issue of slavery in 1861. But I think it was the

firing on Fort Sumter really was the thing that shocked people, that they would go this far.

01:41:30:00

SEAN WILENTZ:

There have been compromises all the way back to 1787, somehow there had always been a compromise. Somehow, we worked it out. Now, it didn't work out. And the South was to blame, as northerners thought. I mean, Lincoln was very clear that he had to make sure that he was not going to be the aggressor. It was going to be the South that was the aggressor. And, that's what happened. But the beginning of the war is different.

SEAN WILENTZ:

And then, also, I might come back to the Gettysburg Address. I mean, I think the Gettysburg Address is where you see truly what had happened to northern opinion. I mean, Lincoln is ahead of northern opinion, to be sure, on this, but you see what has happened. I mean, there he is at the battlefield of the greatest conflict of the war, to bury the dead. The war has become something that it was not at the beginning. The war has become the war for a new birth of freedom. The word slavery doesn't actually appear in that speech, but everybody knew what he was talking about as a new birth of freedom. It's a war for democracy above all, government of the people, by the people and for the people. That's democratic rule. He had been elected President democratically, the South seceded. That cannot be allowed.

SEAN WILENTZ:

So by the time we get to November, 1863, and the reason that Lincoln's speech was so powerfu,l was that – and he could do this – he drew together what had been the gathering force of northern opinion. Not everybody by any means, but he marked the shift to rededicate in effect the war itself, which is

what happens at the Gettysburg Address. Again, and I said earlier, I mean, with absolute lucidity and clarity, every word weighed, every word mattered. That was his prose. But I think that's where you see, the North that's to be, or the cause that's to be, really coming into being. And, he gave voice to it.

The Gettysburg Address

01:43:50:00

SEAN WILENTZ:

There were two big speeches at Gettysburg in November, 1863. One was Edward Everett's, which went on forever and is completely forgotten. And the other is Abraham Lincoln's, 272 words, which is remembered by everyone. Lincoln's purpose was pretty straightforward. His purpose was to dedicate a battlefield and a battlefield graveyard, a cemetery. That's what he was there to do. But by the time he got to 1863, the end of 1863, the character of the war had changed. The character of the war had shifted. Many, many, many, tens, hundreds of thousands of people had died. The war had proven to be not at all what it looked like it might be in 1861. It turned out to be a war of horrifying carnage, on top of everything else. So here was Lincoln really in a sea of death actually, when you think about it, what had been a sea of death, and these are the remains. And, he was trying to make sense of all of that.

SEAN WILENTZ:

Lincoln thought about death a lot. Lincoln, some think that was morbid, but he had a sense of mortality about him, and you can see that in various aspects of his life. But I think that he was confronting that, the sacrifice that had been made on such a massive scale, and he tried to put that together. He tried to bring together what the purposes of the war actually were, and to do so, to explain the sacrifice and to honor that sacrifice in a way that went beyond really anything he'd actually said before, he hadn't quite had the occasion to

do this. He had annual messages and so forth, but really this was a different kind of occasion. That's what he did. And that's what he did at Gettysburg: to announce, no surprise, but still it had to be said, that this was a new birth of freedom, that the American revolution was being reborn in this war, in this great titanic struggle, but that the war stood, in the end, for democracy itself, and that the two went together.

01:46:12:00

SEAN WILENTZ:

As I said, there's always been the central problem of American history had always been. How could this democratic republic deal with slavery and its legacy? And that struggle over that is the struggle of American history. At Gettysburg, it came to a head, and he put them both together: that salvation, the vindication of democracy, requires a new birth of freedom, and that the new birth of freedom goes hand in hand with the salvation, the vindication of democracy. The two are there. That's what I think Gettysburg does in an extraordinary way. I mean, in so far as Lincoln's idea, the fundamental idea in the United States of America, was in the Declaration, it was the proposition that all men are created equal. That is to say, human equality. If that's the center of the whole thing, that's it: here we are, this is the moment. And that's what these men died for.

SEAN WILENTZ:

And, we will continue. We will continue the struggle. I mean, you can read the Gettysburg addresses as perennial, as everlasting, because the struggle really isn't over. You can read it today and say, we're still here, President Lincoln. We're still fighting. And, that's what gives it its timelessness, I think. And many more people have had to die in that struggle, but we're going to keep it going. And, we're going to keep it going just the way you did it. Because we understand that freedom is about the vindication of America, that America

does stand for something. And, if we can fight that fight, as you understood it, as you helped us understand, we'll have lived up to a noble purpose. That's Gettysburg.

Lincoln and Frederick Douglass

01:48:34:00

SEAN WILENTZ:

Frederick Douglass is a great man. Fredrick Douglass is a great abolitionist. And, Frederick Douglass actually had broken with Garrison on the question of the Constitution, but he's a radical. He's an agitator. He's the radical, whereas Lincoln's the Republican. So, there's a kind of division of labor here. There's the radical agitator and there's the political leader, the politician, the President. Now that's going to lead to possibilities of convergence, but most of the time it's going to lead to all kinds of conflict. And it can lead both ways, and it certainly led both ways in the case of Frederick Douglass and Abraham Lincoln. Abraham Lincoln gives his first inaugural address, and Frederick Douglass reviews it and kind of gives it a pan. I mean, he really hated it. He just said, "Honest Abe, ha! There's no honest here. He's dragged the Constitution into the gutter. He's talking about all this stuff. He's not talking about getting rid of slavery," which is what was important to him.

SEAN WILENTZ:

Well, Abraham Lincoln wasn't going to talk about that because he wanted to try to keep the Union together at that moment. Slavery wasn't the issue that he was going to be talking about. It didn't get off to a great start, let's put it that way. Thereafter, I sometimes say, Frederick Douglass is always getting ticked off at Abraham Lincoln because Abraham Lincoln isn't doing enough. And so, he goes into the White House, as he's going to give the President a

piece of his mind. And, it was a great mind to be giving him a piece of. So, it was a lot there. And he always goes in, and he always leaves saying, "He's so great. He's such a wonderful guy, this President, this Abraham Lincoln."

SEAN WILENTZ:

Now part of it had to do with the way that Lincoln treated a Black man, which was.. How many?... There had been slaves had been in the White House, not a whole lot of people like Frederick Douglass. Simple respect was part of it, but it was also, I think, that Lincoln could bring out in Douglass the logic of what he was doing. He helped Douglass understand what he was doing, that he wasn't being dilatory, that he had a reason for doing what he was doing. So Douglass would come away, "Wow, this is great." And then, he'd forget about all of that. And, he'd go back with his radical friends and he'd get ticked off again. So that in 1864, he's actually, he's not backing Lincoln for the presidency. He's backing Frémont, along with the other radicals.

SEAN WILENTZ:

Goes back to the White House, and he has another conversation with president Lincoln and with Secretary of War Stanton. And they talk about deputizing in effect, Frederick Douglass, to go and bring more slaves, more enslaved runaways to the Union lines to help organize. He talks – he thinks of it as the John Brown plot. Well, it's not exactly that, but it's– he's going to make, this is a military thing and he's so happy and he's going to – now, it didn't happen, because in the end Sherman took Atlanta and the war took a different course and that wasn't necessary.

SEAN WILENTZ:

But then, their final meeting is the most extraordinary one, because there's been this back and forth, right? The radical pushing the president, he's not doing enough. He's just another politician. The President, he's saying, "Here's

this great man, but God, he's giving me some headaches. I'm going to try and bring him over to my side." He does for a time. But then comes the final meeting, which is extraordinary, because this was on March 4th, 1865, and Lincoln has just delivered the second inaugural. And, you remember the second inaugural is the speech where he actually takes the full measure of slavery and the war, or attempts to. The war is not over yet. The war is still continuing. It's pretty clear that the Union is going to win, but it's not over by a long shot. And he talks about how if there must be one drop of blood drawn by the sword for every drop of blood drawn by the lash, we will pay that price. Now, that's pretty heavy. And people remember, actually, the "bind up the nation's wounds" and "malice towards none and charity for all" part of the speech, which is important, but there's also the full understanding of slavery and slavery in the war.

01:52:56:00

SEAN WILENTZ:

At any rate, so, Lincoln gives his speech. And, it's inauguration day. They go back to the White House. They're going to have a big reception. Frederick Douglas shows up for the reception and the guards, the white guards see Frederick Douglass. And they say, "Oh, this Black guy's not getting in." So, they stop him from getting in. So then, eventually he managed to get his way into, I guess it's the East Room of the White House, big reception. Lincoln sees him in the back of the crowd coming in and he says, "There's my friend Douglass. I want to speak to my friend Douglass." Right? It's nothing. People can make him out, what a great guy. And, there's nothing especially noble about this; it's just that he's treating this person as a person, as his friend. Now, he's being a politician too, because six months earlier, Douglass was after his hide. "Here comes my friend Douglass," and he brings him to, calls him forth, calls him forward. And he says to him, "I want to know, what did you think of that speech? I really want to know what you thought of that speech. I really care

what you thought of that speech." To which Douglass says, "It was a sacred effort, sir. It was a sacred effort." And that's the last meeting between the two of them. And five weeks later, Lincoln's dead.

01:54:23:00

SEAN WILENTZ:

But what I think we see in that relationship is a convergence of the radical and the President. In American politics, people misunderstand this a lot, that there is a division of labor. And when it works, when American politics works, when change really happens, is when the forces of equality, egalitarianism, understand what politicians have to put up with, and when politicians have to understand what the egalitarians have to put up with.

SEAN WILENTZ:

And when it really can work. And I suppose we've seen it in American history, we've seen it during the New Deal, we saw it. We certainly saw it in the '60s. That moment when Lyndon Johnson actually gives his speech where he says, "We shall overcome" and Dr. King weeps – that's the moment of convergence. That's how things get done. It's not all going to be lemonade and twinkle toes. It's not all going to be happy. It can't be happy, it shouldn't be happy.

SEAN WILENTZ:

But each side has to understand the other, and get it, and understand it. That's politics in a way. The greatest reformers, the greatest egalitarians have been the ones who were also politicians, who understand politics. I was talking about John Lewis earlier, he's an example of that, but I think Dr. King was that way as well. And Bayard Rustin and those guys. I mean, people who understood that politicians have to be understood, not just denigrated, because if you want to get anything done, they're the ones who are going to get it done.

01:56:10:00

SEAN WILENTZ:

Politicians likewise have to understand that the forces of change are unruly, the forces of change are not going to be there to kiss your butt. They're going to be there to fight you because things need changing, and you're in the way, sort of, until you can prove that you're not. Now, Lyndon Johnson could understand that. I think John Kennedy sort of began to understand that, certainly his brother understood that, he came to understand that, Robert Kennedy understood that. The people at the Justice Department understood that, the Civil Rights Division, they understood that. In America – it doesn't always happen, but the extraordinary moments are when that happens.

SEAN WILENTZ:

So what I'm saying is really that Douglass and Lincoln are an example of that. I mean, it's not as if Douglass is the leader of a movement. He's not. He is a spokesman for a point of view, because the abolitionist movement, while it continued, it was still out there, it wasn't the same as it had been before the war, before the Republican Party came on. So it's different, it's not exactly the same.

SEAN WILENTZ:

But Douglass is the great spokesman of Black abolitionism, of Black America in many ways at that point. And it was not easy, but I think that they both show the capacity to understand one another. They came to understand where they were in this struggle. And so, I think, historically, that's what the importance of that relationship is. And something we can take from it, not just historically, but in our own lives. Which is, again, it's not being wussy. It's not giving anybody a break. You can't give anybody a break, but you have to understand where they are coming from in the political system.

SEAN WILENTZ:

This is what being a politician in part is about, is that you don't take things personally, and you understand where the person who is... Even if he's really your enemy, or if he's your ally who thinks he's your enemy, you have to understand where they're standing, why they're standing where they're standing. If you can understand that, then you can act with wisdom. And that was certainly something that Lincoln gained and I think Douglass did too.

The question of what would follow slavery

01:58:55:00

SEAN WILENTZ:

The question of what was going to happen racially after emancipation went all the way back to the 18th century and people were wondering, if we are getting rid of slavery, what's going to happen? Are the races are going to be able to coexist harmoniously or not? And most white people, I mean, Thomas Jefferson is a good example, but I mean he, not alone, thought that was impossible. Not because they thought that Black people were terrible, although, Jefferson's not particularly noble in this regard. But because there was a belief that after all that had happened, it was impossible to imagine a biracial society. There were some that were about “Black inferiority,” that Blacks were inferior to whites, and we have to get them out of here. We have to have this beautiful white society, and there's that racist reason. There was also the reasons that things have been so terrible for so long, it's impossible.

SEAN WILENTZ:

That's the pessimistic view. That's a pessimistic view that runs throughout American history, about race relations. There's always a pessimistic view about race relations. There's an optimistic view as well, and you see it in bits

and pieces among whites in the earlier period. Much much more among African-Americans. One of the extraordinary things, in fact, is the degree to which, absolutely the reason that they opposed colonization, many of them, not all, there were some Black pro-colonizationists in bad periods, but they were Americans. This is what David Walker is saying, "I'm an American. I'm going to call you Americans, you white people, but I'm an American too. I deserve to be here. I'm not going. I built this country as much as you did." So these two things are there from the start. I think you said, the year 1864…

02:01:00:00

SEAN WILENTZ:

Lincoln himself had been a pessimist, much like his hero Henry Clay. He couldn't imagine, especially in the 1850s. The 1850s was a period, in the aftermath of the Fugitive Slave Act, where racial pessimism was really on the rise, on both sides of the color line. I mean, it's then that you see Martin Delaney getting his stuff together, and you see even Douglass' sons are getting... Frederick Douglass in fact, even is talking for a little bit of time about colonization projects and so forth. There's really a feeling in the aftermath of the Fugitive Slave Act and everything that happened, that this is not going to be possible. You know, this is not going to be possible.

SEAN WILENTZ:

Lincoln, he's part of all of that, but he also always says it's crazy. How are you going to take 3.8 million... Just taking the enslaved people by themselves, how are you going to get 3.8 million people? There aren't enough boats. It's not going to happen. At the same time, in his pessimism, right? His pessimism tells him it's never going to work out, but his practical side says, "Well, we have no choice. We have no choice." Now, I can't imagine how we're going do it, but what are we talking about?

SEAN WILENTZ:

And so when he's President, he goes to the famous meeting in 1862, about the same time as the Horace Greeley letter. He meets with these very distinguished African-Americans from Washington D.C. He treats them rather rudely. He starts talking about colonization ideas, and you should look into all of that. They say, "Well, we'll look into that." He says, "Take all the time you want." One of the reasons he says "Take all the time you want" Is because he knows he has the Emancipation Proclamation in his back pocket. It's all going to be there.

SEAN WILENTZ:

But, I think, as late as the annual message in 1862 he's still talking about colonization and stuff. But by the time we get to 1864, which is the year you mentioned, he's kind of sloughed all that off, as I think John Hay says. John Hay thought this whole thing was nuts from the start. He said, "Thank goodness he's not talking about colonization anymore." It was a vestige by the time you got to 1862. It wasn't going to happen.

Lincoln's evolution toward Black rights

02:03:32:00

SEAN WILENTZ:

While Lincoln was always naturally anti-slavery, and while he always had perfectly friendly and warm relations with African-Americans, I think the war, for the same reason he's getting at in Gettysburg – that's the point, the sacrifice, the fact that so many Black Americans had sacrificed so much, even to get into the Army, let alone to fight in it, made a great impression on him too, brought him closer or something to an idea. And so, by the time you get to April 1865, he was the first American President that ever talked about the

possibilities of any kind of Black citizenship, giving Black men the right to vote. Which is of course why he dies. He is assassinated in part because... He's certainly not talking about colonization any more by the time we get to April 1865. And he gives his speech where he says he believes…

SEAN WILENTZ:

Let me back up. He had already written a letter to Michael Hahn in Louisiana talking about how there ought to be some kind of suffrage rights given to ex-slaves – ex-slave men, I mean, women are not yet a part of the equation. He's already kind of on record in his own mind about that. Then he gives his speech in Washington, after he'd come back from Richmond. He says that he believes at least some of those who had served the nation, some African-Americans ought to be given the vote. And in the crowd is John Wilkes Booth. And John Wilkes Booth mutters infamously, notoriously, "That means N citizenship. I'll put him through."

SEAN WILENTZ:

Now he had already been thinking about killing Lincoln at that point. But that was a moment. So you can say, in the end it's a little bit romanticized perhaps, but that Lincoln was a martyr for Black citizenship in a way, at least as far as John Wilkes Booth was concerned. So there was that.

The ongoing struggle of race relations in America

02:05:57:00

SEAN WILENTZ:

There are these periods of optimism and pessimism on race relations, and there always have been. It's on both sides of the color line, and not just the color line, but the political line, progressives and reactionaries, or however

you want to put it. There are moments when I was growing up in the late 1950s, early 1960s, into the... 1965 was a moment of great optimism. Things were changing. Entire structures were being undone. Not easily, but they were being undone.

SEAN WILENTZ:

I think we've been living in a period of real pessimism for a very long time. You can see that in the way people feel. I think about young people growing up today and they've grown up in a period where despite the election of an African-American president, nevertheless, it doesn't seem like anything's really changed. And in some ways we've gone backwards. When you get rid of the Voting Rights Act, things have gone backwards. Why? Because it can't work. Because America is not what it says it is. Because America is a lie, basically. I mean, you might say it's the truth, you might think it's the truth, but it's not really the truth. That's the pessimistic view, that America cannot imagine bi-racial harmony, if that's the term we want to use. Cannot imagine a beloved community. It can't, because America isn't built for that.

SEAN WILENTZ:

We've been living with that, for a while. Abraham Lincoln is one of the best examples of that being a lie, or that being not the whole truth anyway. That there is an optimistic side here, that we really have to own. But again, that's because the struggle is always on. That's why we read the Gettysburg Address, it's to realize that that is possible. And that's why the words, I think, can stir us is that in that direction, of understanding that you cannot have America unless you have freedom. And in a way, you can't have freedom, unless you have America, the America that was promised. The promissory note that Dr. King talked about.

SEAN WILENTZ:

Where else are you going to get freedom? Are you going to get freedom in England? Are you going to get freedom in Russia? You're not going to get freedom there. You're getting freedom here. So the two go together. You have to have them both. But that's the optimistic view. I'm going to go to my grave an optimist, but to be an optimist living in pessimistic times is quite a sentence from Heaven.

The reaction to Lincoln's assassination

02:09:01:00

SEAN WILENTZ:

The reaction to Lincoln's assassination among African-Americans was one of unbounded grief, and horror, sorrow. There are lots of descriptions of Lincoln's body being borne from Washington out to Springfield, that long, long train trip, and stopping off along the way, and how at every stop, African-Americans were the most, or among the most grief stricken. This actually goes back to even before he was shot, in Richmond. When he goes to Richmond, he comes into Richmond, it's the African-American community, It's the Blacks, former slaves, who now flocked to him. He was really thought of as an emancipator. He really was.

SEAN WILENTZ:

And his death, on Good Friday. It's so redolent with Christian imagery. You can't believe it. You can't believe it's true. I think for the African-American communities, all of these places, it was unbounded grief. And what's to come of us? We just got freedom. Who is this guy, Andrew Johnson? Huh? It's not as if it was a sure thing. I think that just the great love of Lincoln was on display.

In the South, there were some who kind of got it, who said, "This is a terrible thing. This is a terrible thing for us." Because, they saw that Lincoln's

martyrdom could only encourage the radicals in the North to come down even harder against the South. Here they were, they just lost this war. Imagine that some German had bumped off FDR right at the end of World War II, and you're a German. You're thinking, "Oh no, this is not going to be good." Well, it's not a perfect analogy, but you see what I'm saying. So some southerners got that. But there were plenty of southerners who thought, "Finally." That it was the last act of the Civil War, and they won. They won. *Sic Semper Tyrannis*.

SEAN WILENTZ:

I go down south a fair amount. Not that much, but some. And you can still see people selling tee shirts, *Sic Semper Tyrannis* on it. That act established a poisonous legacy that is still very much with us. It's not just in the South, but it's really deep in the South, the white South. So, yeah there were plenty of people real happy. Look at Mary Boykin Chestnut's diary. I think she says some rather choice words about the demise of the president that she had come to despise.

02:12:07:00

SEAN WILENTZ:

I mean, Lincoln had freed the slaves, as far as they were concerned. This was the undoing of everything that they believed was holy, Christian, and American. And this man was responsible for it. Frederick Douglass, all these other... He was the man responsible. So there's plenty of celebration.

SEAN WILENTZ:

I don't have the stories in front of me, but you can find them. I mean, there's plenty of stories of southerners. I mean, it's funny, the Lincoln image in the southern mind, because by the time you get to D.W. Griffith, by the time you get to *Birth of a Natio*n, right, Lincoln's a good guy, because Lincoln was the

guy who was going to spare them the horrors of Reconstruction. He was going to malice towards none, charity for all. So, Lincoln kind of gets reabsorbed in the southern white imagination – not that there's any one southern white imagination, you know what I'm saying – but in that part of the imagination, he gets reabsorbed as a good guy. So everybody can like Abraham Lincoln.

SEAN WILENTZ:

But, at the time, no, he was the man responsible for your son's death. You know, it was a war. Yes, it was about slavery, but it was a war too, and people had suffered and died. People had seen their entire... if you're along Sherman's March, you're pretty ticked off, but you're ticked off at Sherman. But you're also ticked off at Lincoln. You're not so sad to see that somebody bumped him off, because of what had happened to you. The Civil War is the one war, until recently, but at least up until Vietnam, it's the one war that Americans lost. But it wasn't every American, it was just some Americans. The white South, that's still a theme, a big theme in understanding American history, let alone the history of the South. And Lincoln's death is part of all of that.

SEAN WILENTZ:

Look at the photographs, I'm thinking about the North now, the photographs of the crowds. Those of us of a certain age, it's a bit like reliving what we went through in 1963. To see the crowds lined up. He was just taken across to Arlington, he wasn't shipped out to Boston or something. But the feeling that this can't be happening, and it is, and a kind of stunned, stunned... And even more I think in Lincoln's case, much more in Lincoln's case, because it had come after the war. I mean it was the last act of the Civil War.

SEAN WILENTZ:

And to think that at the moment of absolute glory, not just for a man, but for a whole cause, at a moment of absolute glory, of absolute fulfillment... The day that he died, or maybe the day before, he was riding around in his carriage with his wife. He was just feeling, "I am so happy now, finally. It is done. It is done." That's a personal thing. But the entire country was feeling that way. The South one way, and the North another.

02:15:48:00

SEAN WILENTZ:

It's beyond Shakespeare. It's beyond any kind of example you can name of tragedy. Whitman tried to write about it, wrote about it beautifully in “When Lilacs Last on the Dooryard Bloomed.” He makes the point, in that poem actually, that I was trying to make very poorly, which is that he moves from the death, the ceremonies for Lincoln's death and the flambeaux, the fire at night as people were trying to see the coffin. But then moves out over all the dead in the war, and the carnage of the war. And then eventually comes to the symbols, the thrush and the drooping star. And death, it was the embodiment, if you will, of death as an aspect of life. It took someone of Whitman's imagination to make clear just how profound that event was. Going even beyond the Civil War, going to the depths of our humanity.

SEAN WILENTZ:

Yeah. Go to Ford's Theater some time. You're eternally at the moment where you want to just stand at that door, and keep that guy from getting in there, and stop it. Just stop it. But you know, you can't. Even historians can't do that. But you want to, you want to. Or you want to say, "Don't go. Don't go to the theater tonight, stay home. Stay home with your wife, have a good time." There's always this moment where you think you can undo these events, and it's only because it's so profound. It's so much deeper than even history.

Sic Semper Tyrannis

02:18:07:00

SEAN WILENTZ:

Sic Semper Tyrannis is the motto of the State of Virginia, and it means Ever Thus To Tyrants. It's not altogether clear whether Booth actually said this, but there were witnesses who said at the time, in the theater, that after he jumped out of the box, and he may have hurt his leg then, maybe not. It doesn't matter. That he brandished the knife that he had used to slice open Major Rathbone's arm. He held up his knife, and muttered the words, or uttered the words, "Sic Semper Tyrannis." Which would be a perfectly, in character, on stage, John Wilkes Booth bit of dramatism. A bit of dramatics, rather. It would be a perfect John Wilkes Booth dramatics, because that's what he was doing. It was for the world.

SEAN WILENTZ:

So that's what it means, Ever Thus to Tyrants. Where was I? I think it was in South Carolina. I was at a barbecue joint, and they were selling Sic Semper Tyrannis tee shirts, with a picture of Booth shooting the president. I didn't buy one, but I should have. I should have bought one. The money was going to go to somebody anyway. Just as an example, just to remind people what it's still like down there. That was only 10 years ago. So that's what it means.

END TC: 02:19:34:00