JAMES OAKES
LINCOLN'S DILEMMA
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

James Oakes Interview
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James Oakes interview. Take one. Marker.

Lincoln's early views on slavery

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JAMES OAKES:

So we know that his parents, when they lived in Kentucky were in an anti-slavery church, listening to an anti-slavery preacher. We know that when they moved to Indiana, they continued to be members of an anti-slavery congregation. Lincoln later said that his father left the slave state of Kentucky to move to the free state of Indiana in part because of his anti-slavery convictions. Mostly because of the insecurity of land titles in Kentucky, but in part, he said, for his anti-slavery convictions. So we have every reason to believe him when he says later on that he couldn't remember a time when he wasn't anti-slavery. We have a better sense of how many Blacks lived in Springfield when he was there. He had a Black barber. He did interact with members of the Black community in Springfield when he was a young man. Before that, I can't say.

Frederick Douglass' upbringing

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JAMES OAKES:

Douglass was born Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey on a plantation on the Eastern shore of Maryland. He was raised primarily by his grandmother, because his mother lived on a different plantation and was owned by someone else. He appears to have been from an early age, recognized as an unusually bright young man. He always believed that his father was a white man, probably his owner, but we don't know for sure. He was sent as a young man to live with a family in Baltimore, which was unusual.

JAMES OAKES:

In Baltimore, he learned to read. First his mistress began teaching him to read. But there's a famous story he tells in his autobiography that her husband found out that she was teaching him to read and ordered her to stop on the grounds that you spoil a slave if you teach the slave to read. So she did, but he continued to find friends, white friends, who were willing to continue teaching him to read. So he taught himself to read and learned how to read at a very young age, which is another indication of an unusual temperament on his part.

JAMES OAKES:

When his master died, he was sent back to Baltimore with the possibility that he might become a plantation slave, because family slaves on plantations were divided up upon the death of a master. It was one of the most terrifying moments in any slave's life, was the death a master, because you didn't know what was going to happen to you. Families got broken up. Communities got broken up. But again, recognized as an unusual young man, he was sent back to Baltimore to work there. It was in Baltimore that he began to read anti-slavery speeches in newspapers.

JAMES OAKES:

One of the ways he learned to read was through a common school reader known as the Columbian Order, which contained anti-slavery speeches that he read. So he knew there were people in the North who were opposed to slavery. He knew all about that. He began to dream about escaping to the North and escaping to freedom. He made a couple of attempts. But shortly after he got married, his wife had saved enough money to be able to fund his escape.

JAMES OAKES:

He was familiar from working in the Baltimore shipyards with getting onto a boat and using free papers, so forged free papers. So he got to New York. In New York, he met an anti-slavery leader, a leader of the Black community there named David Ruggles who warned him, correctly, that New York City at that point was not a good place for a runaway slave to be and told him to keep going.

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JAMES OAKES:

Since it was a Democratic city, and the Democratic party was tied very strongly to its Southern,increasingly pro-slavery wing. So the politicians in control and the police were therefore more willing than police and sheriff's and marshals in other parts of the North to participate in the capture and return of fugitive slaves. Part of the reason was that the economic life of New York City was tied more than any other city to the commerce with the South. It wasn't the basis of New York's wealth, but because New York was such a huge port, it was already the largest city in the country, it had a huge commerce based on its ties to New England and upstate New York through the Hudson River. So it was the major port. And it became the major port through which cotton was exported to England or redistributed to Northern

factories. So it had long ties and strong ties to the South that other cities didn't have. So that gave the city a kind of pro-slavery flavor that wasn't true of other cities.

Being a fugitive slave at the time Douglass arrived in the North

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JAMES OAKES:

You were more secure than the slave catchers would have liked. That is, the vast majority of slaves who escaped to the North are never returned. They're never caught. And one of the reasons they were never caught is that naturally escaped slaves would gravitate toward one of the many free Black communities that dotted the Northern landscape. And slave catchers learned early on that they attempted to go into those communities to capture escaped slaves at their peril. So a few hundred slaves ended up getting returned to the South, but maybe 10,000 per decade escaped without being returned. And it became a source of real sectional animosity. It was one of the reasons the slave states seceded from the Union in 1860 and '61 is because as they said, "Quite clearly, we can't get our slaves back. You're required by the law of the land to return slaves."

JAMES OAKES:

Now there was dispute also at the highest levels of American society, the political level and the legal judicial level, over exactly what right the slave holders had to capture their slaves. Was it a limited right of reception? Or was it a broad right of property, as the slaveholders claimed. Northern states insisted that it was a much more limited right. That you could not in fact, come into a Northern state and attempt to recapture a slave as if there were no Fifth Amendment guaranteeing the rights of due process. And that becomes the legal basis for the political difference between the North and the

South over capturing fugitive slaves. Northern states wanted to guarantee due process rights. The slave holders did not.

Frederick Douglass' criticism of Lincoln

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JAMES OAKES:

Early in the war, Frederick Douglass took the position that many radicals took, which is that Lincoln should immediately take a very aggressive stand against slavery. That he should enlist Blacks in the Union Army, which he did not do right away, and was generally frustrated by what he perceived to be Lincoln's slow, dilatory pace toward emancipation. It was a position that radical abolitionists tended to take in the earliest months of the war. And that position gradually changes as Lincoln's anti-slavery position becomes clearer and more aggressive. So there's another kind of convergence over the course of the war. As Lincoln commits himself to the complete emancipation of all the slaves, and ultimately the complete abolition of slavery, Douglass' opposition to Lincoln naturally declines, moderates. And by the end of the war, he sees Lincoln, or claims to see Lincoln, as a friend and Lincoln seems to feel the same way. I think he says so explicitly.

The beginning of Black soldiers being allowed to enlist in the Union Army

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JAMES OAKES:

Soldiers are recruited into the Union Army through states. And the recruitment process is to some extent determined by the 1793 Militia Act, which excludes Blacks from the Union Army. So the law doesn't allow the Blacks who are clamoring to be admitted into the Union Army until Congress

rewrites the law, which it does in early 1862, July of 1862, rewrites the Militia Act. So in addition to that, over and above the legal obstacles to enlisting Blacks in the Union Army, Lincoln is a bit reluctant to do so for fear of alienating the unionist but not anti-slavery whites, whom he needs in his coalition to sustain the war. So he gradually shifts his position on Black troops as the war drags on, and he comes to see them as a necessary enhancement of the strength of the Union Army.

JAMES OAKES:

Plus part of the process by which you undermine slavery in the South is to recruit slaves, not just free Blacks in the North, but slaves into the Union Army. So his position gradually changes. The law is fixed. And in the latter half of 1862, we begin to see him allowing experiments in the recruitment of slaves into the Union Army, and with the Emancipation Proclamation of January 1st, 1863, he expressly opens the Union Army to the recruitment of Blacks for military purposes. And then, within the next several months, the military sets up the United States Colored Troops, because, as I said, states generally do the recruitments, right? But in the slave South, if you're going to recruit slaves, you're not going to get the slave states to recruit. So you have national recruitment into the United States Colored Troops.

JAMES OAKES:

And by the middle of 1863, that recruitment is well underway. And you start to see Black troops participating in campaigns. And the world is watching as this happens, and seeing how this is going to work out. And it does work out, and in the summer of 1863 there is a fairly rapid shift in Northern public opinion in favor of recruiting Blacks into the Union Army, based on their performance at places like Fortress Monroe and various battles in the Lower Mississippi Valley.

Frederick Douglass and Black recruitment

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JAMES OAKES:

Well, he begins to give speeches early on in 1863, once the Union Army is open to recruiting Black troops. And he gives speeches, actively encouraging Northern Blacks to enlist in the Union Army, notwithstanding the fact that they are discriminated against in the Union Army. There are limits to how much Black officers can be promoted. They're not paid as much as white soldiers and he acknowledges all that. And he complains about all that, but he says, "Nevertheless, look, we have a lot of skin in this game, and it is very important for us to be active participants in this war for the emancipation of Blacks in the South." So he gives us a number of very powerful speeches, arguing for Black recruitment, while at the same time he is a critic of the discriminations that Blacks are suffering. And it is that issue that leads to his first meeting with Lincoln in the summer of 1863.

The political strategy of the Emancipation Proclamation

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JAMES OAKES:

Well, the push and back and forth between Lincoln and the radical wing of the party is going on all the time. And I've often said that you could push Lincoln in the direction of emancipation in a way that you could not have pushed, say, Andrew Johnson in the direction of emancipation. So yes, Lincoln was pushed, but he was inclined to respond to the pushing. And there's a series of interviews he gives with some radical abolitionists in early 1862, who are pushing and meeting with him. And he's saying, "Look, go out there and drum up support because the more support you drum up for

emancipation, the easier it's going to be for me to respond affirmatively to that pressure." So he's a good politician in that sense. He knows he wants to be pushed.

JAMES OAKES:

By the way, I don't know if it's apropos of anything. There are extremely similar conversations between Lyndon Johnson and Martin Luther King in the early 1960s, when Johnson says, "Look, go out there and drum up support. If you want me to push for a civil rights act or voting rights act, I need popular pressure on me to help me do that." So a good politician knows how to use public pressure to get what the good politician wants. And Lincoln was that way.

JAMES OAKES:

The question of moral motivation versus military motivation seems to me to be misguided. If you pay attention to the politics of emancipation in the North, from the earliest months of the war, it's very clear that if you are anti-slavery, you are going to support emancipation as a military necessity. And if you are not anti-slavery, if you're a war Democrat or an anti-emancipation Democrat, you're going to denounce the idea of military necessity as bogus. There is no military necessity. So military necessity is an argument that people who didn't like slavery used to justify emancipation. But it's not just an excuse. That is, they have behind that a very serious constitutional argument, right? The Constitution doesn't allow the federal government to just go and take people's property away from them, and the slaves are the legal property of their owners in the Southern states. You can only justify this by reference to the war powers of the Constitution. So military necessity is something that anti-slavery people believed in, was morally right to do, but also the only legal justification for doing it. So the idea that it was a moral versus a military justification strikes me as, again, it's an artificial distinction.

JAMES OAKES:

The reality of military necessity is that if you believe that slavery is the economic bulwark of the Southern Confederacy, slave labor is what keeps the Confederacy going, it made the South, the slave holders rich, then undermining slavery is a way of undermining the Confederacy from within. So there is a logic to the military necessity argument, as well as a constitutional imperative behind it, as well as the fact that you're likely to believe in military necessity if you don't like slavery.

The Emancipation Proclamation and the second Confiscation Act

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JAMES OAKES:

If you believe that nothing had happened until the Emancipation Proclamation, and Lincoln suddenly changed his mind and decided to begin emancipating slaves, which I don't think is the case. Lincoln believed going into the war, that the union had the authority to emancipate the slaves under the war powers if they came into Union lines. And they begin doing that within weeks of Fort Sumter. And the process by which they do that becomes increasingly aggressive over the course of the next year.

JAMES OAKES:

So on July 17th, 1862, Congress passes a second, more sweeping Confiscation Act. And it's the last day of Congress, and it's passed a whole bunch of bills as Congress often does at the very end. And the following week, Lincoln meets his cabinet for the first time since Congress went out of session and since he signed that bill, with a pile of proclamations on his desk, based on the various bills Congress has just passed. And among them is the first draft of the Emancipation Proclamation, which is based on the Confiscation Act, right?

JAMES OAKES:

And in fact, in September, when Lincoln issues the preliminary proclamation, he explicitly cites the first Confiscation Act as part of his justification, his legal authorization for doing so. So he has been moving, Congress has been moving, Northern public opinion has been moving in the direction of a general emancipation since the beginning of the war.

JAMES OAKES:

In that sense, the Emancipation Proclamation is not some earth shaking shift in the course of the war, but a logical development in a policy that is increasingly radical in its anti-slavery implications. On the other hand, the Emancipation Proclamation does announce to the world, and to the people of the United States, that this has become a war for the emancipation of all of the slaves, right? And that really does alter dramatically the sense of what the war was all about. It wasn't simply a war for the restoration of the Union, even though the dissolution of the Union had been caused by slavery. There was now a sense, with the Emancipation Proclamation, that the only way to restore the Union permanently, and guarantee a permanent peace, was to completely destroy slavery.

JAMES OAKES:

Now, the Emancipation Proclamation wasn't going to do that, but it did create the kind of political will that made The 13th Amendment possible, going down the line a year later, right? And in that sense, it's a major transformation in what the war was understood to be about. Not just the restoration of the Union, but the restoration of the Union by means of the complete eradication of slavery.

How the Emancipation Proclamation was received

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JAMES OAKES:

Well, within his own party, it was very well received. After all, Congress had authorized it. The Republicans had voted unanimously in favor of the second Confiscation Act. And to some extent, they were champing at the bit waiting for the Proclamation to come. So they were relieved and gratified and believed that this was a necessary and morally justified move. Northern Democrats, their reception was a bit cooler, but that splits the Northern Democrats into competing wings. Let's say the war Democrats who came around to the idea that alas, although we're not particularly committed to emancipation as such, it has become necessary to suppress this treasonous rebellion, and the peace Democrats, who simply denounced emancipation as a species of radicalism that the Republicans had always intended to undertake anyway, that the entire war was just an excuse on the part of this radical Republican Party to destroy slavery.

JAMES OAKES:

So it splits the North, but by 1863, Northern public opinion is generally in favor of it, often quite enthusiastically in favor of emancipation. The South, of course, the Confederacy, Jefferson Davis denounces the Emancipation Proclamation as "the most atrocious document in the history of guilty man" – something like that – and like Northern Democrats claims that this justifies secession retrospectively. "This is what we said they were headed for all along. You see, we told you that these guys were just bloodthirsty Jacobins. And that's what it shows."

The Conkling letter

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JAMES OAKES:

Technically a private letter, but destined for publication, to James Conkling, in which he explicitly speaks to Northern Democrats who want to fight for the Union and don't want to fight to free the Negro. And says, "Fine, then just fight to free... then fine then, just fight to restore the Union. But know this, that when this war is over, there are going to be a lot of people looking back and noticing that there were Black people who were willing to fight for your freedom, and for the restoration of the Union, while you resisted those calls for universal freedom." So he's trying to shame them, shame the anti-war Democrats into submission. And I think... And he does it very effectively, brilliantly in that letter.

The Gettysburg Address

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JAMES OAKES:

The Gettysburg Address comes not only after, obviously after the successful repelling of Lee's invasion of the North at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. It's a sustained three-day battle. So it's dramatic in its own terms and it rivets Northern public attention on what's going on. If Lee can sustain this kind of thing, then the war is over. And so the victory is enormously consequential in the minds of Northerners. Whether it was militarily consequential is up for debate, but certainly in the minds of Northerners it was a major Northern victory, but it also came at a very high cost. So, in deciding to go to the dedication of the cemetery that was being built at Gettysburg, the national cemetery, Lincoln was making a strategic point at a critical moment. It's, again, it's the second half of 1863. He has sensed that the tide of the war has changed, and the tide of Northern public opinion has changed. He's become much more aggressive in his willingness to shame anti-war Democrats in the

North, to silence them, to stop the rioting, to stop their blustering anti-war activities.

JAMES OAKES:

But at the same time, he wants to give Northerners a sense of purpose, of larger purpose for the war. And it's important to understand that Lincoln's quotation at the outset of the Declaration of Independence is not something that comes as an afterthought. Virtually every speech he gave in the 1850s quotes the Declaration of Independence, right? And when he quotes the Declaration of Independence in all of his speeches in the 1850s, he quotes it to demonstrate what he claims were the anti-slavery intentions of the founders, right? If the Negro is a man than my old faith tells me, all men are created equal, right?

JAMES OAKES:

And he calls that principle, of fundamental human equality, the sheet anchor of American republicanism. Every time he quotes that, he's speaking anti-slavery language in the 1850s. He doesn't mention slavery in the Gettysburg Address, but you have to understand that every time he has said it, mentioned that in the past, it was always about slavery. So he's using, again, the founding principles of the United States to elevate the war towards something more exalted than the mere restoration of the Union. Because if he just wanted the restoration of the Union, he could have conceded all of the pro-slavery demands that were being made on him during the secession crisis. Right? So it's a masterful way of taking account of that particular moment in the history of the war, and providing Northerners with a sense of purpose in the context of something that is in fact, quite, become quite protracted, quite brutal and quite bloody.

The second inaugural address

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JAMES OAKES:

The great historian Richard Hofstadter, once commented that Lincoln was horrified by the amount of death in the war. Maybe Hofstadter said more horrified than a person in a position of power can afford to be. And I do think, I do think the increasingly serious, sober tone of his public messages, culminating in his second Inaugural Address, is a function of his recognition that a valuable, invaluable service to the freedom of humanity has come at a cost that neither he, nor anyone, could have imagined would be necessary.

JAMES OAKES:

Lincoln was never much for organized religion, but he wasn't an atheist. He was something closer to a deist, which meant that he believed there was a God and that human events were designed providentially, but that we human beings were incapable of knowing what the inscrutable will of God was. And that's what his final statements about God's will in this war indicate, that both Northerners and Southerners pray to the same God, but neither of us really can figure out what God actually intends in this war. Right? And if God wills that every drop of blood drawn from the lash shall be paid for by another drop drawn by the sword, so let it be said, God's will be done. Who are we to say otherwise? It's quite remarkable

JAMES OAKES:

What's remarkable about that second inaugural address is that this terrible war has ended with a victory by the North, and there is not even a hint of gloating on Lincoln's part. And that also is quite remarkable. There is no... He doesn't get up on a platform with a banner that says "Mission accomplished" behind him. Right? He just wasn't going to gloat. He was too conscious of, first, the fact that now that the war is over the North and the South are going to have to live together somehow, and gloating isn't going to help. But also, I

just think he wasn't inclined to gloat under any circumstances. He was, as I say, he was way too conscious of the price that had been paid for this victory.

The origins of the 13th Amendment

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JAMES OAKES:

The 13th Amendment originates in the same period as the Gettysburg address does, that those public letters shaming the Northern anti-war Democrats come in, the second half of 1863, when it looks like the North is winning, the tide of the war has changed, public opinion has changed, but it is also the case that the Emancipation Proclamation is not going to be enough to completely destroy slavery, because it emancipates slaves, even in large numbers, but it doesn't abolish slavery anywhere. The war powers clause allows the emancipation of individuals, slaves could come within union lines, but it does not allow the federal government to abolish slavery in a state. That's still part of the Constitution, right? And the only way around that, the way around that Lincoln tries in late 1860, in the second half of 1863, he's still operating within a constitutional framework that says states abolish slavery.

JAMES OAKES:

So as he is engaging in all this other activity, this public relations activity, to elevate the purposes of the war, to shame Northern anti-war Democrats, to justify Black troops and defend Black troops, he also begins to use the attack on slavery, the military attacks on slavery to pressure the Southern states to begin to abolish slavery on their own, because that's the only way it can be done constitutionally. And you see this in a series of letters in late 1863 to military and civilian authorities in a series of Southern states saying, "Look, get abolition going, get your state to abolish slavery, get it done in Missouri,

get it done in Arkansas, get it done in Maryland, get it done in Tennessee, right?" And above all, "Get it done in Louisiana, right?" And it is this series of attempts to get the States to abolish slavery that indicate the degree to which there's a constitutional obstacle that the federal government can't actually do this. It has to be done by the States.

JAMES OAKES:

And it's in that context that at the very end of 1863, Congress comes back into session and congressmen begin to say, "Look, let's just do this this way. Let's just have a constitutional amendment, abolishing slavery everywhere in the United States." And that's getting debated at the beginning in early 1864, it becomes part of the Republican party platform in the summer of 1864. And in the meantime, Lincoln's serious efforts to get the Southern States to abolish slavery on their own, begin to pay off. And he gets over the course of 1864. Arkansas, Missouri, Louisiana, Maryland, the loyal state of Virginia, Tennessee. They all begin to abolish slavery on their own. And why is this important? Because it requires three quarters of the states to abolish slavery. And the slave States are never going to abolish... Excuse me, because it takes three quarters of the states to ratify a constitutional amendment, and there aren't three quarters of the states that have abolished slavery and therefore will ratify.

JAMES OAKES:

When the war begins, there are 18 free States and 15 slave States, right? That's not even close. You can add a few free States. You can add West Virginia, you can add Nevada, you can add Kansas and you'll get up to 21, but 21 to 15, still isn't close to the three quarters that you need. But if you flip a series of slave states like Maryland and Louisiana and Missouri and Arkansas, you'll get closer to the numbers you need. And in fact, on the day that Congress finally sends the 13th Amendment out to the states for ratification, enough slave states have flipped and abolished slavery to account for three

fourths of the states, right? So it's the pressure on the states, driven by the fact that the Constitution doesn't allow abolition any other way.

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JAMES OAKES:

That actually makes possible the ratification of a constitutional amendment abolishing slavery nationally, everywhere in the United States. And the abolition of slavery in those individual states is in turn driven by the effects of the Emancipation Proclamation, right? The enlistment of large numbers of Black troops, the destruction of slavery, the undermining of the power of the slaveholders in these various States. So you take three distinct policies, right? The Emancipation Proclamation, which is military emancipation; state-by-state abolition, which has been the goal of anti-slavery politics right from the start. Put those two together and you create the conditions for the success of an entirely different third policy, which is a constitutional amendment to abolish slavery everywhere in the United States. And you see the effects immediately. As soon as the amendment goes to the States, one by one, all of those states that Lincoln has successfully pressured to abolish slavery immediately begin to ratify the 13th Amendment. And without those ratifications, there is no 13th Amendment.

Lincoln's re-election prospects in the summer of 1864

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JAMES OAKES:

So, just as war weariness in the spring of 1862 brings one set of consequences, and a sense of victory, impending victory, in the latter half of 1863, has another set of effects on Northern public opinion and Northern politics, so too does the stalemate between Lee and Grant in Virginia in the

spring of 1864, and into the summer, revive war weariness and lead to the suspicion among Republicans, including Lincoln, by August of 1864, that he was going to lose re-election, and he begins to prepare for his loss. And one of the things he does in preparation for his loss is invite Frederick Douglass back to the White House and says to him, "Look, it is a very good chance I'm going to lose this election. And in the meantime, not enough slaves have been emancipated under the terms of the Proclamation, and we need to get as many slaves freed before this war ends." And so he invites Frederick Douglass to come up with a plan to send free Blacks from the North into the South to entice more slaves than ever into Union lines to emancipate themselves.

JAMES OAKES:

It's the summer of 1864. It's August of 1864. He's convinced that he's going to lose his re-election. And he asks his cabinet to sign a letter blind that they haven't seen, explaining that it is absolutely crucial that the incoming president be recognized as the legitimate leader, but that as much as possible should be done to restore the Union on the basis of as much freedom as possible. But it's a letter indicating how deeply pessimistic he was at that particular moment in 1864.

JAMES OAKES:

And this is the function of his conviction that he needs to weaken slavery as much as possible before his impending loss in the November elections. In September, that begins to change. The tide of war changes again, a series of Union victories shifts public opinion back, and Lincoln's reelection chances are dramatically improved.

The politics around the passage of the 13th Amendment

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JAMES OAKES:

Well, he's one of a number of people who are actively involved in pressing the House of Representatives to finally approve this 13th Amendment. The house had rejected it earlier in the year, and the Republican victory at the polls in November of 1864 gave Lincoln and his allies the kind of clout, political purchase, they needed to persuade a handful of folks in the House of Representatives to switch their votes, and finally endorse the 13th Amendment. Seward was – his Secretary of State, William Seward – was actually far more actively engaged in this process. And there were all sorts of encouraging and, sort of, arm twisting and allegedly even paying off a handful of congressmen to switch their votes, of Democratic congressmen to switch their votes. There's not been any evidence that that actually took place.

JAMES OAKES:

Certainly there's no evidence that Lincoln ever authorized such payments.

And the truth is that the votes came primarily from two sources. They came from congressmen in states, that, in the intervening months, had abolished slavery, right? Missouri, for example, and from Northern Democrats who lost in 1864 and were therefore lame ducks and had nothing therefore to lose by switching their votes, because they were already out of Congress, right? And even that took considerable pressure.

JAMES OAKES:

Now, the fact is that a new Congress would be coming in with enough Republicans to get the 13th Amendment through. The problem there is that the war is still on, Lee has not yet surrendered, and the justification that Lincoln and the Republicans had for the 13th Amendment was, again, military necessity. If the war ends, if Lee surrenders, and then Congress comes back into session, they've lost their justification for the 13th Amendment. The military justification disappears.

JAMES OAKES:

So, they have to press, before that happens, to get as many votes shifted as they possibly can. And that's what Steven Spielberg's movie captures, the drama of getting those last votes, how they got them is a little different from what the movie suggests, but the drama of getting those last votes is quite real. And the effect that the final vote had on Congress that day was as dramatic as any vote ever taken in Congress, because everybody knew what it meant. Everybody knew that it meant something.

JAMES OAKES:

Lee's argument all along in the spring and summer of 1864 was, "The only way we're going to win this war is if we make it so difficult for Northerners that they give up on the Republican Party, and we can negotiate with the Democrats." Once the Republicans win, his justification for holding on disappears, and yet he continues to hold on. And, as you say, if he hadn't held on, it might've been more difficult to get those last votes through Congress, because the military justification was not there.

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JAMES OAKES:

One of the things that happens, for example, and this is in the movie, right? Is that there are peace feelers being sent out by the Confederates, at the behest of Northerners, and Lincoln is explicitly asked during the final debate, "Are there peace commissioners in Washington D.C.? And he knows that they're just outside of Washington D.C. and he sends back a very misleading note saying, "To my knowledge, there are no peace commissioners in the city of Washington." Right? It's misleading, right? But he wants that vote, because if it looks like there's going to be a negotiated settlement, there's no more justification to switch your votes.

Favorite passage from Lincoln's speeches

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JAMES OAKES:

It's the passage in which he's contemplating the enormous cost of the war, in which he says that everyone knew that the war was caused by slavery, but no one could have imagined the result would be so fundamental and astounding.

And then he says that if God wills, that until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said thousands of years ago, still, it must be said, the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.

JAMES OAKES:

And it's not just what he's saying that is astounding, but that he's saying it at that moment, at a moment of victory. To say something so humbling and so beautiful is unparalleled in my mind, in the annals of presidential or American speechmaking. It's truly extraordinary judgment.

Lessons to be taken from Lincoln's leadership

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JAMES OAKES:

This is going to seem mundane, but what I most admire about Lincoln is his recognition that if you're going to get things done in politics, you have to build coalitions, often coalitions of discordant elements of people you don't always agree with on many issues, right? And he was masterful about that, but he understood that pragmatic requirement of all good politics did not mean you had to give up on fundamental principles.

JAMES OAKES:

It was that extraordinary ability to balance the pragmatic demands of everyday politics with very real and indispensable principles about fundamental human equality, for example, that he never gave up on. And that always organized his thinking, but which never stopped him from making sure that the coalition he built within the Republican Party or within the North, during the war, or within the nation.

JAMES OAKES:

Because the truth is that he understood early on that the slaves in the South were part of the coalition he needed to defeat the Confederacy. He understood that women were necessary to support the war. So, it wasn't simply a coalition within the Republican Party, it was a larger political coalition in the North to sustain the war effort. And it was an even broader coalition of Americans that it took to sustain the commitment to a union that was ultimately free of slavery. And it's that extraordinary ability to see this larger political picture and to behave in the most pragmatic ways while always maintaining that high principle he was committed to.

Lincoln's capacity for change

00:47:02:00

JAMES OAKES:

I think of his career before 1854 as basically the career of a Whig politician who stayed in that groove, and took a long time to get out of that groove, didn't feel comfortable getting out of that groove, but ultimately did, in part because there was no choice, there was no Whig party left.

JAMES OAKES:

So, once he becomes a Republican, once he commits himself to anti-slavery politics, there is a way in which he never abandons that fundamental groove, if you will. But every step along the way, he's making pragmatic decisions about, how are we going to handle these anti-Catholic upstarts, and how are we going to deal with them, because we're going to need them in our coalition, because they also tend to be anti-slavery, right? And how are we going to deal with the conservative Whigs who don't want to hear about a fugitive slaves, but are willing to support banning slavery from the territories. We've got to be quiet about that. How are we going to handle these abolitionists who want me to immediately open the Union Army to Blacks when the law doesn't allow me to, and Northern public opinion won't allow me to.

JAMES OAKES:

So he's constantly moving, but moving within a set of principles that are pretty much unchanging. So, again, it's that balance of steadfast commitment to certain basic principles, and a willingness, maybe because of that, to be pragmatic about what he needs to say, who he needs to speak to, who he needs not to speak to at any given moment, because he does have that baseline commitment to anti-slavery principles.

Differing depictions of Lincoln

00:49:00:00

JAMES OAKES:

On the one hand, the more I studied Lincoln, the more I admired him, but at the same time, my conception of politics is … but at the same time, I think there's too much hyperbole in the way we talk about Lincoln, that is, we attribute powers to him that he didn't have, that he would never have claimed he had. So, we make him greater than he was, or a greater villain than he was.

JAMES OAKES:

So, part of me, even as my admiration for him developed, I also felt this simultaneous need to tamp down a little bit on the hyperbole, right? He didn't free all the slaves with the stroke of his pen, he wasn't a bloodthirsty monster, he wasn't a reactionary white supremacist, he wasn't any of these extreme things that we say of him. And he didn't have the power to do the kinds of things that we sometimes attribute to him, but was he as great as the president gets? Yeah, he was. He really was.

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