

Cwbr Author Interview: The Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln And American Slavery

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Interview

CWBR AUTHOR INTERVIEW: THE FIERY TRIAL: ABRAHAM LINCOLN AND AMERICAN SLAVERY

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Interview with Dr. Eric Foner, Dewitt Clinton Professor of History at Columbia University

Interviewed by Nathan Buman

Civil War Book Review (CWBR): Today, I'm joined by Eric Foner who is DeWitt Clinton Professor of History at Columbia University to discuss his Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln and American Slavery*. Professor Foner, congratulations on your award and thank you for joining me.

Eric Foner (EF): Thank you very much; I'm happy to talk to you

CWBR: What inspired you to take this approach to looking at Abraham Lincoln?

EF: Well obviously, as you know, there are enumerable books about Lincoln out there already, many of them are, of course excellent books. I feel that in recent years, with some important exceptions, there's been a tendency in some of the literature to sort of focus so specifically on Lincoln that the wider world slips from view sometimes, that, in a sense, my feeling is Lincoln needed to be put back in political context, particularly in this one area: that my book is about Lincoln and slavery; it's not a total biography. It's about Lincoln and the evolution of his ideas about slavery, policies about slavery, and I did feel that there was still something to be said tracing out how Lincoln's attitudes and views changed over the course of his life: how he related to other people in the whole broad anti-slavery firmament. So, I guess, I felt there was room even though there is such a large body of literature already about slavery, about Lincoln

CWBR: You mention placing him in that overall world and I wonder: is seems like you suggest that we can often see certain aspects of Lincoln in ourselves. Does examining the personal growth during his life, in terms of how he looked at government, slavery, and society, make him more approachable? Does it remove some of the mystique, making him more human?

EF: Well, I hope so. I mean Lincoln was a man of greatness; he grew into greatness. I don't think he was a great figure for all of his life and I think we can learn something from how Lincoln related to broad social movements of his time: abolitionism, other forms of critique of slavery, which he was not really part of, but he was willing to learn from them, and I think just the notion of a statesman who is open to new ideas, who is intellectually curious, who is willing to change-of course, in the greatest crisis in our nation's history- is something we can learn from: that people should not be totally set in their ways, totally inflexible. Today, if a politician changes his view about something he is immediately denounced as a flip-flopper, right? Lincoln was a flip-flopper; he changed enormously, in some regards: in terms of policy about slavery, attitudes about race. Another way of putting it is he learned, he grew, he understood that new ideas were valuable. So the notion today seems to be that anyone who learns anything, that's to be criticized and condemned because they're not holding exactly the same positions throughout their whole life.

CWBR: How important was an ideological base in Revolutionary politics and the ideology of the Founding Fathers to Lincoln's political foundation?

EF: Well Lincoln, of course, greatly admired the founding fathers as most people of his generation did. In that famous Lyceum speech when he was still a young man in the late 1830s, he sort of said, well what have the Founding Fathers left for us to do, so to speak? They created this, what he considered the last, best hope of man, this democratic system of government, and, in a sense, they had usurped what subsequent generations might do to achieve notoriety and greatness. But ,of course, Lincoln felt that-he believed-(this is open to some criticism) but he believed that the founders had set the country on a course toward the eventual abolition of slavery and he felt that their policies were being overturned particularly in the 1850s by Stephen A. Douglas and those pressing for the expansion of slavery. And so, on the one hand, Lincoln claims to be, in a sense, a conservative; he's going back to the original purposes of the revolution. But, in doing so, you're radically altering the system that has existed since that time. He said that the nation cannot exist forever half slave and half free. Well, it

had existed half slave and half free for well over 50 years. So on the one hand he says he's going back to the views of the founders; on the other hand he's really trying to change the fundamental nature of American society because of his anti-slavery commitments.

CWBR: Well placing Lincoln, then, in the overall society, did Lincoln's unique upbringing in Kentucky and Illinois, on the edge of slaveholding society, give him a distinctive perspective into intersectional politics and dealing with the South during secession and war?

EF: Well, of course, Lincoln, as you well know, was born in Kentucky, a slave state. He grew up in southern Indiana and then southern and central Illinois, areas settled mostly, at that time, by people from the South. He married into a Kentucky family, so he obviously had very close personal connections with the South and, in some ways, with slave society. And I think that that gave him a sense of—he didn't denounce southerners. He didn't denounce slave owners the way some abolitionists did; he never said that they are sinners, that kind of thing. In fact, he said in one of his speeches that if we were in their position we would be pretty much doing the same things they are. But I think that during the war one of his problems may have been, at least in the secession crisis, that he overestimated the degree of support for the Union in the South. He sort of felt that secessionism was a minority movement, was almost like a conspiracy of a small group. And he believed that there was this strong latent Unionism in the South that would eventually rear its head and end secession. That, of course, did not turn out to be the case so maybe, in that sense, on the one hand, his personal connections with southerners made him less likely to engage in a kind of vitriolic denunciation; on the other hand it may have led him to overestimate the degree of Unionism. After all Kentucky was not your typical slave state: Kentucky remained in the Union, it was divided his wife's family, his father-in-law ,who died in 1849 I think, was strongly pro-Union. Henry Clay, the great Kentucky statesman who Lincoln admired so much, was pro-Union and Lincoln may have somewhat extended those views to the rest of the South in a way that didn't turn out to be totally accurate.

CWBR: Once Lincoln was elected, was there an honest opportunity for compromise in your opinion?

EF: You know, it's interesting, Lincoln admired Clay enormously but Clay made his reputation, of course, as the Great Compromiser. Lincoln, in the

secession crisis, refused to compromise. He said he is perfectly willing to compromise on peripheral issues, but not on the core question which was the westward expansion of slavery. On that, he said I am not compromising so Lincoln was willing to risk war even in the face in the secession crisis. So I think Lincoln was able (and this is another lesson for statesmen) to clearly differentiate, in his own mind, between core principles, which he wouldn't compromise, and other issues which he was willing to compromise. So, if Lincoln's only aim, as some people seem to think was to preserve the Union, he could have easily preserved the Union by just giving in to the South, no problem. Give the South what they want, let them expand slavery, and then the Union is saved. What's the problem here? But Lincoln said no; it must be a Union worth saving, a Union in which slavery is confined and put in, what he calls, the course toward ultimate extinction. And that's your fundamental problem there; if you don't compromise on that you're not going to settle the secession crisis.

CWBR: How does one reconcile the fact that many white southerners mark Lincoln's election as a blow to slavery with the fact that many abolitionists like Garrison worry that Lincoln is not radical enough? What does that tell us about the complicated task that Lincoln faced?

EF: Lincoln was not an abolitionist; he didn't claim to be an abolitionist. Abolitionists were often very critical of Lincoln. On the other hand, people like Garrison, Wendell Phillips, and Frederick Douglas hailed Lincoln's election as a step in the right direction. They said no, this is not going to end slavery just like that, but it's definitely a step in the right direction. Simon P. Chase, who was an abolitionist although a republican politician, says this is the culmination of my life's work-Lincoln's election-the slave power, southern slave owners, have been expelled from control of the federal government. So, even though abolitionist felt Lincoln was not nearly as radical as they wanted, southerners (white southerners, secessionists) feared that Lincoln's election marked a fundamental shift in power in the country. They didn't think that Lincoln was going to sign an emancipation proclamation as soon as he came to office; he had no legal grounds for doing that, and he made it clear he wasn't going to do it. But, in the longer run, this seemed to be to them a sign of the northern states now acquiring control of the national government and they felt slavery would not be safe ultimately under the rule of people who were hostile to slavery. So that's why they seceded. Read the South Carolina Declaration of the Causes of Secession, they don't beat around the bush; that's what they say: slavery is no longer safe with the election of Lincoln.

CWBR: What role did the Union military play in forcing Lincoln to define or clarify his policy on slavery and what role did the slaves themselves play in that?

EF: At the outset of the war, of course, Lincoln says that this is not a war about slavery; it's a war about preserving the Union. Four slave states, the Border States, remain in the Union; Lincoln was very concerned about maintaining their loyalty. But very quickly the government has to take cognizance of slavery. The first thing is slaves run away. Wherever the Union Army goes, slaves start running toward Union lines and the army has got a dilemma. At the beginning they start returning these slaves but many soldiers don't want to do that. They're not in the army to be fugitive slave hunters and, moreover, many of those slaves have been used as laborers for the Confederate Army and why send them back to build fortifications against your own forces? So this forces the Lincoln administration to start making policy about slavery and in 1861 they do it in a modest sort of way. By 1862, in the spring when they capture the southern part of Louisiana, they're in control of an area with many, many thousands of slaves and so the slaves put the issue on the agenda so to speak by their own actions. And then the army has to deal with it. The army says: well what are we supposed to do? We can't just start capturing slaves and sending them back; it is distasteful, it's counterproductive. Sometimes slaves have very valuable information about the disposition of Confederate forces or the local terrain or things like that which they bring to Union commanders and they say: well we just can't send this guy back into slavery now that he's been helpful to us. So that's a couple of, among many, of pressures that are pushing Lincoln toward a new policy on slavery.

CWBR: How did the Emancipation Proclamation alter the course of the war and might the Proclamation be indicative of a general shift toward total war?

EF: Well I think the Proclamation does fundamentally change the nature of the war because it makes slavery officially a target of the Union war effort. Henceforth, after January 1, 1863, wherever the Union Army goes, one of its responsibilities, as Lincoln says in that document, is to protect and maintain the freedom of about 3.2 million (more or less) slaves who were declared free under the terms of the Emancipation Proclamation. So it guarantees that, if the Union wins the war (which, of course, is an "if;" it's not guaranteed) then slavery will end, no question about it. Even though it doesn't apply to Kentucky, it doesn't apply to Maryland, if slavery dies in South Carolina, Mississippi, and Alabama, it's not going to be able to survive all that long in Missouri and Delaware. So it

really does change the nature of the war and, indeed, of American society. It means that now the issue on the agenda is going to be: what is going to be the status of these millions of slaves who are now being declared free people? What's going to happen to them in American society? Are they going to enjoy the same rights as white people? Are they going to be in the same labor system? So it opens up a lot of important questions, even though it sort of points toward solving the question of slavery, per se and so I think it does very much change the nature of the war. And also of course the Proclamation, for the first time, officially announces that black soldiers (black men) will be allowed to enlist in the Union Army and I think the service of the 200,000 black soldiers and sailors by the end of the war does have a very big effect on racial attitudes. Even Lincoln, himself, comes to feel that these people who fought for the Union have stake to claim for citizenship in the post-war world.

CWBR: What effect did Lincoln's increasing use of emancipation as a war aim, as the war progressed, have on public support leading up to the 1864 election? Without Sherman's victory at Atlanta, was a loss to McClellan possible?

EF: Well certainly in August of 1864 Lincoln believed he was going to lose; many Republicans thought Lincoln was going to lose the election. There was a great deal of war weariness in the North; casualties in 1864 were enormous compared to the rest of the war. Even though there had been Union victories, important ones previously, (Gettysburg and Vicksburg) still it seemed to be a sort of stalemate in the East and there was a lot of fear that war weariness would lead to the election of General McClellan, the Democrat. In August 1864 Henry Raymond, the editor of the *New York Times*, and some other Republicans came to Lincoln and said: people think the Emancipation Proclamation is prolonging the war because they'll never come back unless they can keep their slaves. Why don't you say that we'll accept the South back with their slaves if they just give up the war? Rescind the Emancipation Proclamation, basically, that will, at least boost, your chances of re-election because, if they say no, it will prove that the Proclamation is not the reason the war is continuing. And Lincoln seems to have thought about it a bit over night but then he said: I can't really do that. First of all, it would just be wrong to promise people freedom and then rescind the promise. Second of all, we need those black soldiers; if we do this the black soldiers will lay down their arms and without them we can't win the war. So he was wedded to emancipation by then, even at the possible price of losing the election. Then, as you said, Sherman's capture of Atlanta seems to have turned the tide in terms of

public sentiment and he is elected eventually by a very large margin. But basically once the Proclamation is issued, Lincoln is not going to go back on it and, even though some radicals thought he was too slow in issuing it, once it's issued, this is it. This is ow the policy of the Union and he is not going to change.

CWBR: What was Lincoln's vision for American society in the post-war period and how did his vision evolve or change from his antebellum ideas of an American society with or without slavery?

EF: We know very little about what was Lincoln thinking about the post-war world; obviously he was assassinated April 1865 when Reconstruction is really just beginning. There were various plans of Reconstruction put forward during the Civil War but these were plans for winning the war, not a blueprint for the post-war South. And certainly, in his final speech, just before his death he talked about maybe limited black suffrage in the South, which is something he had never publicly spoken of before so I think his ideas were changing and evolving. I don't think Lincoln had a blueprint at all. I think he wanted a relatively quick reunion of the country; he was not vindictive toward white southerners. On the other hand, I think he recognized, by this point, that the former slaves had a claim on the conscience of the nation and you couldn't just abandon them and let them be put back into some kind of system akin to slavery again. How to work that out, how to bring the white South in and yet protect the rights of the black South was a gigantic dilemma which Congress will be wrestling with for several years after this. Of course, the problem was that, once Lincoln is assassinated, you get probably the worst president in American history, Andrew Johnson, replacing him who is totally incapable of confronting this question at all in any serious way and that complicates the situation very dramatically.

CWBR: Professor Foner, I would like to thank you, once again, for taking the time today to discuss with us *The Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln and American Slavery*.

EF: Well I'm very happy to talk to you, absolutely.