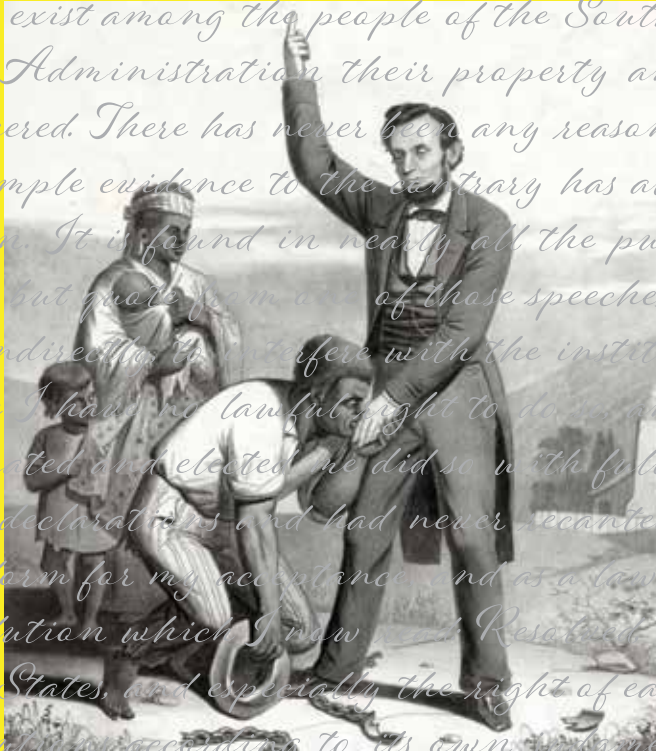


Teaching the Complex History of Abolition and the Civil War

Apprehension seems to exist among the people of the Southern States that by the accession of a Republican Administration their property and their peace and personal security are to be endangered. There has never been any reasonable cause for such apprehension. Indeed, the most ample evidence to the contrary has all the while existed and been open to their inspection. It is found in nearly all the published speeches of him who now addresses you. I do but quote from one of those speeches when I declare that I have no purpose, directly or indirectly to interfere with the institution of slavery in the States where it exists. I believe I have no lawful right to do so, and I have no inclination to do so. Those who nominated and elected me did so with full knowledge that I had made this and many similar declarations, and had never recanted them; and more than this they placed in the platform for my acceptance, and as a law to themselves and to me, the clear and emphatic resolution which I now so Resolved. That the maintenance inviolate of the rights of the States, and especially the right of each State to order and control its own domestic institutions according to its own judgment exclusively, is essential to



BY ADAM SANCHEZ

Every year, I start teaching about slavery and the Civil War by asking my high school students, “Who freed the slaves?” Without fail, the vast majority, if not the entire class, answers “Abraham Lincoln.” Holding back my desire to immediately puncture this simplistic narrative, I continue questioning: “Well, if Lincoln was the Great Emancipator and freed the slaves, what do you think he said in his first speech as president?” My students throw out various hypotheses that I list on the board: slavery is evil, immoral, unjust; people should have equal rights regardless of color; it’s time to get rid of slavery; slaveholders should be punished; and so on.

We then turn to Lincoln’s actual first inaugural address and students are shocked to read that Lincoln stated that he had “no inclination” to “interfere with the institution of slavery in the states where it exists,” that he promised to uphold the Fugitive Slave Act, and that he expressed support for the Corwin Amendment, which would have prevented Congress from ever tampering with slavery in any state. For many students, this is a rupture of

epic proportions. “Were we lied to?” they ask. “Did Lincoln really free the slaves?” “If he didn’t, who did?” “What else have we been lied to about?” These kinds of questions can ignite deep learning and historical engagement.

The real story of slavery’s end involves one of the most significant social movements in the history of the United States and the heroic actions of the enslaved themselves. Revealing this history helps students begin to answer fundamental questions that urgently need to be addressed in classrooms across the country: How does major social change occur? What is the relationship between those at the top of society—presidents, Congress, elites—and ordinary citizens? What kind of power do “leaders” have? What kind of power do we have?

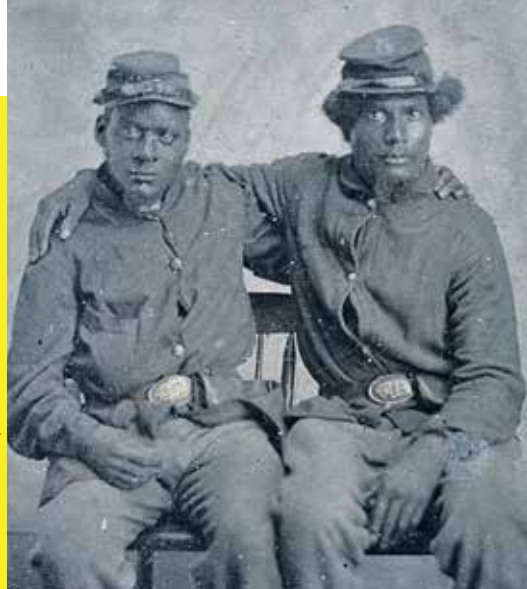
If problematic, simplistic historical narratives—like Lincoln freed the slaves—persist, our students will confront the world without understanding how change happens. What could be more important than learning how one of the country’s greatest evils was ended? It’s in this spirit that my colleagues and I at the Zinn Education Project have prepared the 10 lessons and materials in a new resource for educators, *Teaching a People’s History of Abolition and the Civil War*, from which this article is excerpted.

Rethinking Lincoln, Emancipation, and the Civil War

Of course, Lincoln’s views on slavery and black rights did not start or end with his first speech as president. As an Illinois congress-

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PHOTO: WORLD HISTORY ARCHIVE/LAMY STOCK PHOTO;
TEXT: FIRST INAUGURAL ADDRESS OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN



Left: Two African American Union soldiers during or shortly after the Civil War. Right: Escaped slaves outside a cabin in 1861.

man, Lincoln endorsed state laws barring blacks from voting, holding office, serving as jurors, and marrying white people. Lincoln strenuously opposed extending slavery into the U.S. states and territories and denounced the institution as a “monstrous injustice,” but he also did not believe that the Constitution gave the federal government power to interfere with slavery where it existed. His preferred strategy was one of gradual emancipation, compensating slaveholders for their loss, and sending free blacks to be colonized outside of the United States.

But by his second inaugural address in 1865, Lincoln had issued the Emancipation Proclamation and campaigned for the 13th Amendment abolishing slavery without compensation or colonization. In this speech, he was much less conciliatory toward the South. He painted an image of divine retribution against slavery’s horrors by stating that “every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid with another drawn with the sword.” It’s the Lincoln of 1865 that has been memorialized as the Great Emancipator. But what prompted Lincoln to change his public position?

To start, in order to demythologize Lincoln, it’s important to demythologize the North. At the start of the war, Lincoln was under immense pressure from Northern bankers who had financed slavery and from Northern businessmen whose profits depended on their financial ties with the South. The entire U.S. economy—not just Southern plantations—was built on the labor of enslaved blacks. Although by 1860 enslaved people made up less than 13 percent of the population, their economic worth (in dehumanizing capitalist terms) was valued at more than the factories, banks, and railroads combined. This is why in 1861, shortly after the South seceded, Mayor Fernando Wood suggested to the New York City Council that the city should also secede. The Northern financial and industrial elite were determined to keep their profitable relationship with the South. When compromise failed, they turned to war. The 1860 Republican platform recognized that “to the Union of the States this nation owes ... its rapid augmentation of wealth.” Now that wealth was in danger. The new Confederacy nullified \$300 million in debt the South owed Northern creditors, and Northern elites were determined to recover their losses. As Lincoln asked in a July 1861 message to Congress, justifying waging war for union, “Is it just ... that creditors should go unpaid?” When Lincoln insisted repeatedly during the early years

of the war that he was fighting the Civil War not to end slavery but to restore the Union, he was not only worried about the border slave states that had remained in the Union defecting to the Confederacy. He was also signaling to the capitalists of the North that the war would be waged in their interests.

But there were other interests that Lincoln was forced to consider. The abolitionists and, most importantly, the enslaved themselves understood that slavery was so monstrous that it needed to be completely eliminated. For decades prior to the war, abolitionists—black and white, male and female—petitioned the government, organized rallies and public meetings, produced antislavery pamphlets and books, ran candidates for public office, built new political parties, and created a vast network to harbor runaways and resist slave catchers. By the time of the war, abolitionist ideas had seeped into the new Republican Party. When Republicans swept the 1860 election, antislavery activists nevertheless continued their familiar tactics and criticized Lincoln’s and Congress’ half-measures. Yet now they reached a new, enlarged audience that included those in the halls of power. Formerly derided as radical extremists, the abolitionists seemed prophetic as it became clear to many that the war could not be won without destroying slavery.

The enslaved, who had fought back in various ways since slavery began, escalated their own resistance during the Civil War. As soon as the Union Army came within reach, enslaved people freed themselves—by the tens of thousands. As historian Vincent Harding wrote:

This was Black struggle in the South as the guns roared, coming out of loyal and disloyal states, creating their own liberty. ... Every day they came into the Northern lines, in every condition, in every season of the year, in every state of health. ... No more auction block, no more driver’s lash. ... This was the river of Black struggle in the South, waiting for no one to declare freedom for them. ... The rapid flow of Black runaways was a critical part of the challenge to the embattled white rulers of the South; by leaving, they denied slavery’s power and its profit.

These runaways also created opportunities for the all-white Union Army, in desperate need of soldiers and laborers. Lincoln realized that the Union needed black soldiers to win the war. Although it is possible to interpret Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation as an exceptionally cautious document, declaring the enslaved free in only these parts of the Confederacy where Lincoln had no direct control, and exempting the border slave states and other Union-controlled areas in the South, it was nonetheless an acknowledgement of the changing public opinion in the North and the reality of self-emancipation on the frontlines. The proclamation officially opened the army to African Americans for the first time. With black soldiers now taking up arms against the Confederacy, Lincoln's war for union was transformed into a war for liberation. The emancipation of 4 million people from slavery ushered in a revolutionary transformation of U.S. society led by African Americans.

The reason corporate curriculum and conservative textbooks so often hide or distort this history is because truly understanding the causes of the Civil War, and how that war was transformed, requires an approach that questions those in power and emphasizes collective resistance. As historian Howard Zinn explained:

When I look at the history of the United States, what I see is that whenever anything good has been accomplished, whenever any injustice has been remedied, ... it has come about only when citizens became aroused. That's how slavery was abolished. Slavery was not abolished because Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation. Slavery was abolished because the slaves, the ex-slaves, the escaped slaves, and some white abolitionists got together and formed a movement against slavery. That movement grew from a small group of people into a national movement that committed acts of civil disobedience and violated the law, violated the Fugitive Slave Act, which required the government to return escaped slaves to their masters. People broke into courthouses, broke into police stations; they rescued slaves, and all kinds of acts of civil disobedience took place. Only then did Lincoln act, only then did Congress act, to abolish slavery, to pass constitutional amendments. And we see this all through American history.

To understand abolition and the Civil War then, is to understand how ordinary citizens—with ideas that seem radical and idealistic, taking action together, breaking unjust laws, pressuring politicians to act—can fundamentally change society. There is no more important lesson that our students can learn from studying history.

The purpose of *Teaching a People's History of Abolition and the Civil War* is not to simply dethrone Lincoln as the Great Emancipator. There have been many worthwhile defenses of Lincoln's record, his anti-slavery intentions, and his actions. No doubt, when put into historical context and seen through his point of view, Lincoln can be a sympathetic figure. But the popular narrative that a single white politician ended an institution that formed the economic backbone of U.S. society is simply inaccurate, racist, and dangerous. It took the courageous actions of hundreds of thousands to crush such a profitable system of brutal exploitation. Our job as educa-

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tors should be to expand the viewpoints through which our students look at history. As Zinn pointed out, "Lincoln was a politician. ... We are citizens. We must not put ourselves in the position of looking at the world from their eyes and say, 'Well, we have to compromise, we have to do this for political reasons.' We have to speak our minds." I've found that students are capable of complex thinking around the role that Lincoln played in the abolition of slavery. However, students' conclusions about Lincoln are less important than their ability to develop an understanding that the abolitionists and the enslaved fundamentally shifted the political terrain that Lincoln was operating on—in other words, a more complex historical narrative that puts ordinary citizens, like themselves, at the center.

Furthermore, it was not simply Lincoln who was transformed during the war. Opening the Union Army to blacks had profound effects on white soldiers and the Northern white public. In the Freedmen and Southern Society Project's book *Free at Last: A Documentary History of Slavery, Freedom, and the Civil War*, the editors write, "Nothing eradicated the prejudices of white soldiers as effectively as Black soldiers performing well under fire. ... General James S. Brisbin, who supervised the recruitment of Black soldiers in Kentucky, described to his superiors how the 'jeers and taunts' of white soldiers were silenced by their Black comrades' bravery." And maybe nothing reveals the rapid shift in public opinion more than the warm welcome white New Yorkers gave the 20th U.S. Colored Infantry, the first black regiment formed in New York City, as they paraded down the city streets in February 1864. Only seven months earlier, blacks had been brutally beaten and murdered during the draft riots. While racism survived the abolition of slavery, the bold actions of black men and women in securing and defining freedom, and the changing racial attitudes of white citizens in response, laid the foundation for postwar antiracist politics. As abolitionist Wendell Phillips wrote to Senator Charles Sumner, "These are no times for ordinary politics; they are formative hours. The national purpose and thought ripens in 30 days as much as ordinary years bring it forward." This concept—that people's ideas can change, and sometimes change rapidly—is crucial for students who have grown up in a world full of racism, sexism, warmongering, and climate denial.

We need a curriculum that surfaces the moments of solidarity, resistance, and courage that made this a more just, more inclusive society. Students often feel alienated from history and politics because they are told that great (usually white) men make history. Too often, students arrive in my classroom cynical about the possibility for social change. There are countless stories of collective struggle that are antidotes to cynicism. Let's tell them. □