

Kristen Borges
TAH A More Perfect Union
September 21, 2012

In an already crowded field of study, Eric Foner's latest historical effort *The Fiery Trial* is his contribution to the research on Abraham Lincoln. Foner acknowledges the subject of Abraham Lincoln may appear to be exhausted. "In the last decade, his psychology, marriage, law career, political practices, literary style, racial attitudes, and every one of his speeches have been subjected to minute examination" (Foner xv). What sets Foner's work apart from the rest is his decision to avoid recollections of Lincoln's words, "related long after they were spoken and often of dubious reliability", and instead focus on Lincoln's speeches and letters or "Lincoln's words as recalled by others only if they were recorded at the time they were spoken" (Foner xvi). Foner set out to examine Lincoln's ideas and policies about slavery from his earliest days through his presidency during the Civil War. Foner places Lincoln within the context of the broad anti-slavery movement and focuses on his "capacity for growth" in his views and policies regarding slavery. In doing so, Foner attempts to break away from an interpretation that reduces Lincoln's position on slavery to a "single quotation, speech, or letter as the real quintessential Lincoln" and argues Lincoln was consistently anti-slavery (Foner xix). Foner argues too many scholars have either ignored or downplayed "aspects of Lincoln's beliefs with which they are uncomfortable...while fastening on that which is most admirable at each stage of his career, especially his deep hatred of slavery" (Foner xx). Foner's position in *The Fiery Trial* is clear; Lincoln had a tremendous capacity for change and learning. He listened to his critics and

overtime his beliefs about emancipation for African Americans evolved. Foner argues Lincoln's hatred for slavery was sincere yet his career was "a process of moral and political education and deepening antislavery conviction" (Foner xx). Foner focuses on the development of Lincoln's ideas, beliefs and political skills as he dealt with one of the most divisive and critical issues in United States History. These arguments will aid in my teaching of Abraham Lincoln's legacy in the US History classroom.

Each year I ask students to consider the legacy of Abraham Lincoln. I provide primary source excerpts from Lincoln's speeches and letters as well as the actual text of the Emancipation Proclamation and the Thirteenth Amendment. In addition, they examine political cartoons from Lincoln's contemporaries and secondary source excerpts from historians (see attached sources). Students closely examine the documents and use that information to conclude whether Lincoln deserves credit for freeing the slaves, or whether he was acting as a politician using emancipation to accomplish other goals. Students move from station to station closely examining the evidence before them as a group. They discuss their findings with each other and consider the sources as a whole. Students are expected to contemplate Lincoln's goals and beliefs toward slavery and how the messages are different depending upon his audience and the timeline. After students gather their evidence, they participate in a seminar discussion regarding Lincoln's legacy. In a sense, the current design of this lesson reinforces the problem of reductionism that dominates the many historical interpretations of Lincoln. Students argue positions by cherry picking evidence that supports a prescribed either-or position on Lincoln's legacy. Instead students should examine critical moments in Lincoln's career in order to recognize the development of his anti-slavery position. Students can use Foner's *The Fiery Trial* as the necessary historical context to examine Lincoln's views on slavery over time.

In an attempt to provide a more complete picture of Lincoln and the development of his anti-slavery position, key parts of Foner's *The Fiery Trial* could be used in the classroom. Beginning with Lincoln's early life, moving onto the pre-war politician and ending with his role as President of the United States, Foner outlines Lincoln's connection to slavery and the cultural and political influences that shaped his position. In his early life, Lincoln made two round-trip journeys to New Orleans in 1828 and 1831 and a trip to St. Louis in 1841. Although the only surviving reference to the New Orleans trip is an account where he described being attacked by thieves, Foner argues it would have been impossible to be in New Orleans at that time and not witness slave auctions (Foner 10). Lincoln's contemporaries described their time in New Orleans and reactions to the slave trade, but the only reference to slaves Lincoln made was in an 1855 letter to his friend Joshua Speed where he recalled the journey they took together on the steamboat in 1841.

You may remember as I do...that there were on board ten or a dozen slaves shackled together with irons. That sight was a continual torment to me; and I see something like it every time I touch the Ohio or any slave-border... you ought to appreciate how much the great body of the Northern people do crucify their feelings, in order to maintain their loyalty to the constitution and the Union (Foner 11).

Foner uses this opportunity to demonstrate how Lincoln's anti-slavery position changed. Although in 1855 Lincoln recalled that experience as one that bothered him, Foner explains this position emerged from the experiences Lincoln had living in Kentucky, Illinois and Indiana, states with a long history of slavery and the contacts Lincoln had with slaves through his in-laws the Todds or Speed's family. "Lincoln shared many of the racial prejudices so deeply rooted in the border region in which he grew up" (Foner 14). Yet, his ambition set him apart from his contemporaries in that he did not return to Kentucky with the support of his father-in-law to join

the slave holding high society, but instead pursued a career as a lawyer and politician whose anti-slavery position became more resolute.

Foner argues as the institution of slavery underwent a major transformation, so did Lincoln. By the mid-19th century, most of the international community rejected slavery and embraced emancipation. The issue of slavery in the United States emerged as a divisive one. Geography eventually separated the free and slave states, but the increased pressure for emancipation came at slavery's most profitable time. This tension mounted as Lincoln grew into adulthood. Lincoln's early anti-slavery position included empathy for slave holders and recognition for protection of their property under the US Constitution. However, by 1837 as an Illinois legislator and member of the Whig party, Lincoln explained a "no" vote on a resolution that condemned abolition in DC. Lincoln co-wrote the explanation with a fellow Whig and argued "that the institution of slavery is based on both injustice and bad policy; that the promulgation of abolition doctrines tends rather to increase than to abate its evils" (Foner 25). Foner argues this "no" vote protest foreshadowed Lincoln's public stance in the 1850s; "slavery was unjust northerners had an obligation to respect the constitutional compromises that protected the institution; the national government had the power to act against slavery in the District of Columbia; and Lincoln was not an abolitionist" (Foner 26). By hi-lighting some of Lincoln's early life experiences with slavery students would develop a more complete picture of Lincoln rather than one that examines his views in isolation removed from the important historical context.

By the 1850s, Lincoln acted on his anti-slavery ideas, but had yet to figure out how anti-slavery goals would work within the United States political system. Lincoln emerged as Illinois' "foremost opponent of the expansion of slavery" (Foner 62). Foner cites the successful passage

of the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854, as a significant turning point in Lincoln's pre-Civil War career (Foner 64). It is at this time Foner acknowledges Lincoln's public statements underwent a profound transformation. Since 1837, Lincoln believed slavery was rooted in "injustice and bad policy" yet never considered the formation of a political party to oppose expansion of slavery. Lincoln's public engagements helped him reignite his political career and clearly articulate an anti-slavery position. It was in Peoria, Illinois on the evening of October 16, 1854 where Lincoln delivered a "powerful indictment of the nation's new policy regarding westward expansion of slavery". (Foner 63). Here he argued The Kansas-Nebraska Act "presented a profound departure from the original intention of the founding fathers, who sought to restrict the spread of slavery and hoped it would eventually die out" (Foner 66). The author of the bill Stephen Douglas advocated for popular sovereignty in the territories. Lincoln argued this violated the core principles of American nationality and compromised country's original goals.

This *declared* indifference, but as I must think, covert real zeal for the spread of slavery, I can not but hate. I hate it because of the monstrous injustice of slavery itself. I hate it because it deprives our republican example of its just influence in the world—enables the enemies of free institutions, with plausibility, to taunt us as hypocrites... (Foner 66)

Yet Lincoln was unsure of the future of slavery. "If all earthly power were given to me, I should not know what to do, as to the existing institution" (Foner 67). Foner clearly argues Lincoln was antislavery but not an abolitionist. Although he considered slavery a violation the Jeffersonian ideals life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness like the founders, Lincoln too expected slavery would eventually die out. Lincoln argued "Let us return it to the position our fathers gave it; and there let it rest in peace" (Foner 69). Statements such as this distinguished Lincoln from the abolitionists who called for immediate emancipation. He also expressed sympathy to southern slave holders and recognized the constitutional right to own slaves. Foner argues this speech

“laid the foundation for his approach to the slavery question for the next six years” (Foner 70). However, Lincoln’s empathy with the south did not win him many southern fans and by the time Lincoln took office in 1861, he faced a nation divided into the Union and the Confederate States of America.

Even secession did not lead to Lincoln’s immediate push for emancipation. When it came to freeing the slaves, Lincoln hesitated, fearing if emancipation was a war aim, he would drive the Border States to secession. (Foner 169). However, as many slaves escaped southern plantations, General Benjamin Butler saw a need for human power to assist the Union and refused to return slaves to the south claiming the Fugitive Slave Law did not apply to foreign countries. Butler labeled the escape slaves ‘contrabands of war’ and Lincoln approved of Butler’s actions. Foner argues “Lincoln’s celebration of free labor implicitly conveyed a critique of its opposite, slave labor” (Foner 173). Slowly political pressure mounted to treat the slaves as persons and Lincoln responded “with great reluctance” fearing the impact his decisions would have on the Border States and preservation of the Union (Foner 175). Lincoln avoided a clear anti-slavery position by allowing military commanders to make important decisions. The entire time Lincoln pursued different options such as compensated emancipation which he first extended to Delaware and then to all of the Border States. He also promoted his long held position on Colonization as a potential way to win over the Border States. Lincoln made Colonization part of his plan for dealing with slavery after the war. Although Lincoln reluctantly accepted the Confiscation Act, he urged “Congress to provide funds for the colonization of slaves freed under” it (Foner 186). Foner’s focus on the first sixteen months of Lincoln’s presidency and the changes in the government’s relationship to slavery clearly demonstrates Lincoln’s “capacity for growth”. “Lincoln had become the first American president to send to

Congress a plan for abolition and had signed measures ending slavery in the nation's capital and territories and superseding the Fugitive Slave Act" (Foner 204). Students will benefit from looking at this transformation in Lincoln's thinking rather than simply examining excerpts without the historical context.

This year my class will read short excerpts from Foner's *The Fiery Trial* in addition to using the attached documents. I will present Foner's thesis and have students debate the merits of Foner's argument rather than simply debate his title.

Foner, Eric. *The Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln and American Slavery*. New York: WW Norton and Company, 2010.