

Johann Knets
Hamilton-Wenham Regional High School
TAH Fall Paper

For my fall project I read *The Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln and Slavery* by Eric Foner. In reading Foner's book, I hoped to gain a more extensive base of knowledge of Abraham Lincoln and his dealings with slavery. This topic interested me first and foremost because I currently teach the Civil War and the Emancipation Proclamation to my 10th grade students. As part of our study of that time period, we have a class discussion on the legacy of President Lincoln. The discussion is initially framed as whether Lincoln should be remembered as the "great emancipator", or as the "great statesman". These two positions are used as starting points, with the ultimate answer usually ending up somewhere in the middle, often with the idea that Lincoln was an effective statesman who should also be given some credit for achieving the Emancipation Proclamation. However, after reading Foner's interpretations of Lincoln and his political career, I have now begun to rethink our existing activity.

The "great emancipator", or the "great statesman", these are the common two categories that Lincoln is typically put into when discussed in history. He is often given too much credit as the "President who freed the slaves" or on the reverse; he is often portrayed as a classic politician willing to say almost anything to either get elected or to win the Civil War. However, history is always much more complicated than black and white answers. The study of Abraham Lincoln, although long and exhausted, does not disappoint however in its level of complexity. In his book, Foner sets out to shed new light on Lincoln's actions and legacies. He sets the tone of his novel by first stating that he intended to stay clear of the more recent attempts to plunge into Lincoln's sexuality or psychological state of mind. Instead, his focus is to study Lincoln by placing him appropriately within the context of the time in which he lived in. While covering Lincoln's own personal ideas

and actions over his career, Foner seamlessly incorporates contextual issues such as westward expansion, the growth of a market economy, the influence of the Abolitionist movement, and the larger political picture within the growing sectional crisis of the early 1800s. Simultaneously, Foner places the exploits of Lincoln's political career in the middle of this contextual picture. Whether it is emphasizing his early influences growing up, his time a Whig politician during his Illinois politics days, his rise to the national prominence against Stephen Douglass, or his political maneuvering as a wartime president, time and time again Foner seeks to return Lincoln to his historical setting while tracing the evolution of his ideas and policies. In short, Foner's main goal is to "take Lincoln whole, incorporating his strengths and shortcomings, his insights and misjudgments." In doing so, Foner is able to deliver a complicated, but rewarding account that successfully captures Lincoln's continual capacity for growth.

The activity that I currently use involves students reading the Emancipation Proclamation itself, the speech given by Frederick Douglass in honor of Lincoln at the unveiling of the monument to the Emancipation Proclamation. In addition, students are given a series of political cartoons from the time period, polarizing opinions by historians, and some brief excerpts of Lincoln's speeches. But after reading Foner's introduction of his book, I have rethought our activity to an extent. First of all, Foner remarks that it is counterproductive to set out of context quotes of Lincoln against each other. Lincoln did indeed make different statements concerning slavery from his campaign speeches in his Illinois Senate races, or his national races, but by doing this it takes his words out of context. At the same time, the fact that Lincoln was a skilled campaigner shines through in using his quotes. In the future, I intend to incorporate more of the contextual background surrounding each quote into the activity. In addition, the activity also uses a number of different historian opinions. Foner also comments against this type of tactic where historians are

pitted against each other. On the one hand this is effective as it gives students various arguments to begin with, with which they can expand upon, but at the same time it may limit them to certain polarizing view points. One way to change this or amend it is to incorporate the introduction of Foner's book into the discussion. On the honors level, I believe that having students read the introduction to his book would cause them to think about different ways to approach historical topics. Another way that could improve this aspect of the lesson is to take the various arguments made by historians and then provide students with more contextual information as a way for them to better evaluate the opinions. For example, the idea that Lincoln only made the Emancipation Proclamation as a last resort or the fact that slaves put so much pressure on the federal government that it was made only in reaction are made by historians. In evaluating this, it would be interesting to provide students with statistical information on the number of escaped slaves crowding Union lines, or to provide the British perspective on whether they would have joined on the side of the South. To reinforce one of Foner's main points of his book, context matters at all times and with Lincoln it frequently shaped the parameters that he could operate in as well as his actions.

In fact the use of context is one of the most successful aspects of Foner's book, as he consistently incorporates relevant context into the fold. By doing this, he then illustrates how Lincoln was often affected by the issues at hand, in the moment. For example, Foner effectively incorporated the natural division of the North and South that took place as the market economy began to slowly take shape. Furthermore, Foner establishes the heavy influence that the impact that Henry Clay had on Lincoln, in which Clay imparted a strong disdain for slavery on humanitarian grounds and support for gradual emancipation at the same time. (pg. 18) Another important example of the use of context in shaping Lincoln's ideas connects to his belief that everyone should have a "natural right to the fruits of their own toil" This idea came from Lincoln's early experiences

working for his father, where he was frequently sent out to work for neighbors in order to pay off family debts. Foner remarks that Lincoln once told an acquaintance that “I used to be a slave,” a statement that clearly shows strong impression that these early experiences left upon him.(pg. 36) Fast forward to the crisis created in the wake of the Dred Scott decision, and Foner illustrates how Lincoln still kept to his early ideas concerning equal opportunity for all men. Lincoln did not believe that African Americans were equal with whites socially or intellectually, but he did believe that they had as much of a right to reap the fruits of their own labor as anyone else. In one response to Stephen Douglas, Lincoln stated:

“I think the authors of that notable instrument to include all men, but they did not intend to declare men equal in all respects. They did not mean to say all were equal in color, size, intellect, moral development, or social capacity. They defined with tolerable distinctness, in what respects they did consider all men created equal – equal in ‘certain inalienable rights, among which are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness’...”(pg. 97-98)

These types of examples are just a few of the many various moments when Foner helped shed light on how and why Lincoln developed his core values that he was unwilling to compromise on throughout his career. And in doing so, Foner does an effective job of helping to piece together the larger puzzle that is Lincoln.

Another interesting reoccurring themes concerning Lincoln is that although he often took a moderate approach to slavery in terms of Abolition, he was in fact consistently anti-slavery from the beginning of his political career. Foner establishes this intriguing fact by focusing on early votes of Lincoln in the Illinois state legislature. As a member of the Illinois House of Representatives, Lincoln showed his independent streak by voting against a series of three anti-Abolitionist resolutions put forth by Orville H. Browning. The resolutions were intended to condemn agitation by Abolitionists, to show “deep regard and affection” for southern slaveholders, and to insist that slavery could only be abolished by states themselves. Before the bill came up for a vote, Lincoln

proposed one amendment regarding the abolition of slavery in Washington D.C. In his amendment, Lincoln tried changing the language protecting slavery in D.C. by adding the line, “unless the people of the said District petition for the same.” Lincoln’s attempt failed, 77-6 in the House and 18-0 in the senate as both houses approved all three anti-Abolitionist/pro-slavery resolutions. Though the bill was soundly defeated, Lincoln was one of six individuals to have cast a no vote. To go a step further, Foner also recounts how Lincoln followed up his vote with a letter of protest in opposition to the bill. Being one of three to sign the letter, it was clear from the very beginnings of Lincoln’s career that he was willing to sacrifice his political future for his convictions. (pg. 24-25) This is one of the reoccurring themes of Foner’s book, Lincoln’s consistently anti-slavery stance. Although he clearly did not join the most radical Abolitionists and their calls for immediate abolition, Lincoln was consistently against the expansion of slavery, sought to condemn it on moral and humane grounds, as well as supporting the right of federal government’s to limit its existence in the territories. Taken as whole, this consistent thread or aspect of Lincoln from Foner’s book is just one of the many revealing details that will help enrich my classroom’s study of Lincoln. Combined with his often moderate and at times pro-slavery actions or attitude, these early actions help provide the necessary historical context with which students can evaluate Lincoln’s intentions and motives surrounding the Emancipation Proclamation.

Another interesting aspect of Foner’s book that was quite honestly shocking was Lincoln’s devotion to the Colonization Movement. When studying Abolition, I frequently focus on Colonization as being only an early anti-slavery effort. After evaluating its effectiveness as an anti-slavery strategy, clearly flawed with little hope of success, it is typically dismissed as William Lloyd Garrison once called it, “a cruel hoax”. But after reading Foner’s repeated references to Lincoln’s efforts at spurring Colonization, it is very eye-opening to see its impact right into the middle of the

final days before the Civil War and even after the Emancipation Proclamation was already decided upon. Even as late as 1862, Lincoln was still supporting publicly the idea of Colonization. Foner details the numerous colonization schemes that surfaced during that year, from Brazil proposed the creation of a joint stock company to settle black Americans along the Amazon River. The Danish charge d'affaires in Washington asked the administration to encourage black emigration to St. Croix since the Danish had abolished slavery back in 1848. Even more serious, was Lincoln's own personal discussion and interest in supporting the Chiriqui project, which was designed to find suitable land in Colombia. Foner continues by recounting Lincoln's own words said to a black delegation on August 14, 1862, "You and we are different races...even when you cease to be slaves, you are yet far removed from being placed on a equality with the white race..it is better for us both therefore, to be separated." (pg. 222-224) Time and time again Foner provides evidence of Lincoln refusing to let go of the idea of colonization. Despite having no success in convincing any significant amount of black Americans to support it, Lincoln and many other Republicans continued to cling on to it as part of their overall strategy. This was most likely part of their package to calm fears of slaver owners if they were to agree to abolish slavery, especially the Union border states, but this persistence on the part of Lincoln also demonstrates his own prejudice in that African Americans were inferior and that there would likely be race relation problems after the abolition of slavery. Overall, this extent to which colonization was consistently pushed and supported by Lincoln and his allies was the most surprising revelation from Foner's book. It will most certainly affect the way that I cover the Colonization Movement, as well as how I cover the context surrounding the Emancipation Proclamation.

Perhaps the most important component of Foner's book is his chronicling of Lincoln's ability to evolve and change over time. On the one hand, Foner illustrates that Lincoln consistently

respected the rights of slave owners that were protected in the Constitution, and believed that the federal government had no right to tamper with slavery where it existed in the states. This strong belief is connected to Lincoln's wartime strategy of attempting to coax the Union border states into agreeing to gradual emancipation with a series of negotiations and proposed pieces of legislation. In Lincoln's mind, the way to end slavery in the South was to first get the Union border states on board.

While Lincoln strongly believed this, he was also keenly aware that he desperately needed the support of the border states, most notably Kentucky. During the war, Lincoln made a number of unofficial and official proposals to the border states that included some combination of compensation for abolition, gradual abolition, and support of colonization. Met with resistance from the border states, Lincoln also showed his concern at losing their support in after a July 12, 1862 meeting with two dozen border state congressmen when he stated, "dissatisfaction, if not offense, to many whose support the country cannot afford to lose." By this point of the summer of 1862, Lincoln had made his last ditched effort to woo the border states and their support for emancipation. (pg. 212) However, this strategy began to change as conditions in the war started to worsen. Met with increasingly difficult war conditions, losses by General McClellan and the Army of the Potomac in 1862, Lincoln became convinced that he had to change course and refocus his energies at ending slavery in the South first, and thereby getting the Union border states to go along with emancipation. This is one of many great examples where Foner captures Lincoln's ability to change over time. Faced with mounting military losses, Lincoln saw making an emancipation proclamation first and foremost as a military tool with which he could deal a major blow to the Confederacy. Further supporting Lincoln's political skill, he also left the possibility for Confederacy states to rejoin the union. Equally important, the Emancipation Proclamation did not affect loyal

border states, allowing him to maintain their tenuous support. Dictated by the circumstances of the war, Lincoln changed course at the appropriate time after slowly evolving his stance on the right of the government to abolish slavery. (pg. 221)

After learning many numerous insights into the ideas and actions of Abraham Lincoln's career, the impact that context played in influencing it and his ability to transformation over time, I believe I will be able to provide students with a more enriching understanding of Lincoln's ideas and motives behind the Emancipation Proclamation. Now having a greater understanding of how and why Lincoln arrived at his decision to issue the Emancipation Proclamation has given myself the ability to frame the larger context of the situation to my students. I will now be able to splice in additional quotes, potential documents, and events that will when all combined, be able to provide students with a greater appreciation for Lincoln's ability to evolve, as well for the influence of the context of the situation. For all of these reasons and more, the reading of this book has without a doubt improved my content knowledge. I also look forward to retooling the way that I teach about Lincoln and the Emancipation Proclamation, with the goal of making students' understanding of Lincoln more enriching, engaging, and challenging.