



PODCAST TRANSCRIPT

Slavery & the Civil War, Part 2

HASAN JEFFRIES

My uncle never took my brother and I to the movies. He took us everywhere but to the movies. We went to the Brooklyn Academy of Music to see Alex Haley, the author of *Roots*, and to Yankee stadium to see South African freedom fighter Nelson Mandela on his first trip to the U.S. after being released from prison. But he never, ever took us to the movies. So, when my parents told us he planned on taking us to see a movie, I knew immediately we wouldn't be seeing the latest installment of *Indiana Jones*, and I was right. *Glory*. My uncle was taking us to see *Glory*. It was 1989 and, just between you and I, when I heard we were going to see a Civil War movie, I was like *what the hell?* In my infinite 16-year-old wisdom, I could think of a thousand things I'd rather do than trek up to Harlem to watch a Civil War movie, but I really had no choice in the matter. My parents' house, my parents' rules.

And it wasn't just my brother and I. My uncle had gathered a half-dozen sons and daughters of his friends to watch the movie too, and by the looks on their faces before the movie started, I could see I wasn't the only one thinking *what am I doing here?* But by the time the movie ended, the point of the outing was clear. My uncle wanted us, a group of black teenagers growing up in New York City in the 1980's, to see African Americans fighting for their freedom in the 1860's. I remember him explaining to us afterward that freedom wasn't just given to black people, handed to them happily by Abraham Lincoln. Black people earned it. They seized it, by picking up guns and laying down tools, by running to Union lines and disrupting Confederate ones. *Glory* didn't capture the whole story, but it got enough of it. It was a lesson about African American agency that was new to me, totally upending normative narratives of slavery, abolition and the Civil War. And it made sense, and I never forgot it.

A few years ago, I began teaching a course entitled "African American History Through Film," and for the unit on the Civil War, I show *Glory*. And without fail, before we watch the film, I recognize that same *what the hell?* look on my students' faces that I had almost 30 years earlier. This is because the same myths and misconceptions about black folk not having a hand in their own liberation still persists, but when we discussed the film afterward, I also recognized that same new understanding that I had: that African Americans played a major role in their own liberation, and this is an absolutely foundational lesson, essential for understanding the black and white experience in slavery and in freedom. This is a lesson that my students have to learn, just as I did as a teenager, sitting reluctantly with my uncle in a movie theater in Harlem.

I'm Hasan Kwame Jeffries and this is *Teaching Hard History, American Slavery*. It's a special series from Teaching Tolerance, a project of the Southern Poverty Law Center. This podcast provides an in-depth look at how to teach important aspects of the history of American slavery. In each episode, we explore a different topic, walking you through historical concepts, raising questions for discussion, suggesting

useful source material, and offering practical classroom exercises.

Talking with students about slavery can be emotional and complex. This podcast is a resource for navigating those challenges, so teachers and students can develop a deeper understanding of the history and legacy of American slavery. In this episode, we're going to continue looking at the connections between slavery and the Civil War. Specifically, we're going to explore the role that slavery and enslaved people played in the war once it actually began. We are joined again by historian Bethany Jay, who examines how slavery's presence in the southern and border states shaped the war. She provides terrific lesson ideas and historical resources to help your students understand the actions that enslaved people took during the conflict and the very real effect that their actions had on the development of the war, including the pursuit of emancipation. I'll see you on the other side. Enjoy.

BETHANY JAY

You know, we often just think of the end of slavery or the possible perpetuation of slavery as a part of the Civil War, and we don't think about the enslaved people themselves and the role that they played—not as an abstract concept, *slavery*—but as *individual* human beings. And that's also going to be a part of our conversation as we think about the very real effect that individual people and their actions had on the progress of the Civil War and the course of emancipation.

So, with that in mind, let's shift our attention away from the cause of the war and look at the way that slavery's presence in the southern and bordering states affected the war itself. We're used to talking about slavery when we talk about the Civil War. It's maybe one of the only places that many students learn about slavery in the American history curriculum. Similarly, when we teach about the end of slavery, we often just talk about the Emancipation Proclamation and the 13th Amendment, right? These two moments that gave slaves their freedom in a way that we often speak about it. But, just as we did with the causes of the Civil War, what we want to do is complicate this version of the end of slavery, the notion that enslaved people were *given* their freedom, and we can do this by looking at two interrelated things.

The first is a slow evolution of war time Union policies relating to slavery and the ways that those policies led to the Emancipation Proclamation. And then the second is the way that the actions of free and enslaved African Americans on the battlefield and on the home front ended up hastening the end of slavery, altering Union policy, damaging the Confederacy, and ultimately undermining the institution long before Lincoln's proclamation.

We really want to correct the notion that slaves were given their freedom. Free and enslaved African Americans worked tirelessly to make emancipation the outcome of war. So, let's first turn our attention to Union policy in 1860. It is not a given. In fact, it would be highly unlikely that slavery would end as a result of the Civil War. In fact, Lincoln couldn't have raised an army to fight a war to end slavery in 1861. Actually, in 1860, everybody's thinking that the war is going to be a couple of weeks long. When the war was beginning, there was a whole lot of bluster about exactly how short it's going to be and exactly how few lives are going to be lost on both sides. And so, few people are really thinking about a potential impact for the war on the institution of slavery.

So, the first thing that we will want to look at as we examine the issue of slavery and the progress of the

Civil War is the evolution of Union policy relating to slaves. This policy sort of emerges spontaneously, when Brigadier General Benjamin Butler declared that the three men who had escaped to Union lines in Virginia were, quote, “contraband of war and therefore subject to confiscation.” It’s important because Butler’s actions here become codified in the First Confiscation Act, which was strengthened by the 1862 Second Confiscation Act. And what those acts really did was allow Union generals to take enslaved people as contraband of war, the same way you might take houses, food, and other things belonging to the enemy. These confiscation policies are one of the first mechanisms that helps drive the Union towards a more general policy of emancipation. In fact, the Second Confiscation Act explicitly declares Confederate slaves as captives of war who were forever free. This is one of the first places where we start to see military activities and an attack on slavery go hand-in-hand. What we see is a Union army’s commitment to emancipation as a part of the war.

That Second Confiscation Act freed all slaves of rebel masters who made it to Union lines. So, not just men who could serve or work as laborers in the military, but women, children, anybody. Enslaved people who were confiscated as a result of these early policies were generally employed in the Union Army as things like laborers, digging trenches, cutting down trees, etc. They’re not soldiers. Neither of those confiscation acts led to black military service at this point.

Historian Joseph Glatthaar has argued that these policies were important to the Union effort in two main ways. First, it demonstrated that the Union Army was going to make a commitment to emancipation as an act of war. Second, it aided the Union Army’s war effort, while it took away from the Confederacy’s. So, former slaves are doing some of the work of the Union Army, freeing soldiers for the front lines. And therefore, those slaves are not working towards a Confederate war effort. They were depriving the Confederacy of valuable man power.

Those Confiscation Acts were really important, but as we might imagine, few black Americans were content with serving only as laborers for the Union Army. From the onset of the war, free blacks in the North clamored for a chance to serve as soldiers in the Union Army. Frederick Douglass, whose sons would eventually serve as Union soldiers, is a good example of black arguments about military service. Again, it’s historian Joseph Glatthaar who knows that Douglass viewed black service as essential to the war effort, and he famously said, “This is no time to fight with one hand when both are needed. This is no time to fight with only your white hand and allow your black hand to remain tied.” The reason why Douglass is so passionate about black military service is that he knew that the outcome of the Civil War could affect the future of both free blacks and enslaved people. Douglass said, “Once let the black man get upon his person the brass letter U.S. Let him get an eagle on his button and a musket on his shoulder and bullets in his pocket, and there is no power on earth which can deny that he has earned the right to citizenship in the United States.”

Even Confederate politicians recognized the implications of black military service. Joseph E. Brown, who was the governor of Georgia, famously stated, “Whenever we establish that they are a military race, we destroy our whole theory that they are unfit to be free.” So, even though men ranging from Frederick Douglass to the Confederate governor of Georgia recognized that black service could have a tremendous impact on the war and the future of African Americans, change was still slow, and there’s a variety of factors that serve to delay northern actions on this.

Primarily, we have northern prejudice. Lincoln was afraid that the white soldiers would not enlist if they saw this as a war to end slavery. Second, we have the need to keep the border states in the Union: Delaware, Kentucky, Maryland, Missouri and West Virginia. Those border states are slaveholding states, and they remained loyal to the Union. Obvious threats to slavery could push those border states and all of their resources and manpower into the Confederacy. All of those things combined to delay any changes in military policy regarding African Americans until 1862.

The Union policy on African American service is incremental. It's like this incremental step towards emancipation that makes total sense as an act of war. By 1862, it was clear that this was not going to be a quick fight. It was a brutal war. And the Union Army needed to keep its numbers up, and it could do this by using African American soldiers. So, that year we see both emancipation and black enlistment become official policies of the Union Army. First, in July, Congress passed the Militia Act, which authorized Lincoln to use black soldiers in the military. And then in September, Lincoln issued the Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, which promised freedom to slaves in states still in rebellion as of January 1863. So together these two policies had a big impact on the war. Black soldiers were quick to respond to the opportunity to fight for the Union. And so, we see that Union enlistment really benefits from the Militia Act allowing black soldiers to enlist.

By the end of the war, nearly 180,000 black soldiers had fought in the Union Army. Of those, 98,500 had been slaves who fled the Confederacy. This is important, because recruiting slaves from southern plantations strengthened the fighting force of the Union and denied the South their labor. So, we're seeing that it's weakening the Confederacy on two fronts. It's weakening them by providing service to the Union army on the front lines, and it's also weakening their ability to feed their military and civilian populations. The other thing it did was it also helped to ensure that Britain would withhold their support from the Confederacy. Always a concern for the North was whether England's dependence, or at least perceived dependence, on southern cotton would push them to support the South. And by tying emancipation to the Union war effort, that helps to keep abolitionist Britain out of the fight for the Confederacy.

The historian Stephanie McCurry argues that while it may have taken Lincoln a little while to realize the impact the war could have on slavery, slaves immediately recognized the significance of the war to their personal freedom. McCurry has written an important book, *Confederate Reckoning: Power and Politics in the Civil War South*, and much of what I'll talk about next is taken from her work.

So, on plantations close to the front, enslaved people ran in huge numbers to Union lines, sometimes in groups of 60 or 80 at a time from a single plantation. Those escapees didn't just include men who were running to join the army, it also included men and women of all ages. We can think of this as slaves freeing themselves, and they did it so frequently that planters were forced to acknowledge that the Union Army was not their only enemy, that who they saw as their trusted and valued laborers at home were also working against the Confederate war effort. The pattern repeated itself throughout the war as Union troops moved further and further into the interior of the Confederacy, and slaves risked everything to make it to Union lines. As McCurry and other historians have noted, those mass departures greatly affected the war effort.

First, as I just mentioned, it removed valuable laborers from the field. At the beginning of the war, Confederate leaders really thought that the three and a half million slaves on the home front were going to be one of their greatest resources. But what we see is that they're not. By moving to Union lines, by freeing themselves, they diminished the Confederacy's ability to supply its army and feed its population on the home front. The mass departure of slaves meant that work was not getting done.

Second, and perhaps equally as important, the exodus of the enslaved people had a devastating impact on Confederate morale. Remember, the vast majority of the war is being fought in the South. Southerners are bearing the brunt of the physical damage that is coming from the war and the personal privations that are coming from the war. And so even as that devastation is happening, those who slaveholders always claimed that they considered trusted servants or virtual members of the family were also continuously leaving southern farms and plantations.

So, the Confederates, particularly women, became increasingly demoralized as this happened over and over again. When you read the diaries that Confederate women left, you can see the very personal effect that slave departures had on them. You can see their attitudes changing, and you can use the candid recollections from their diaries and letters to explore this very personal effect of slaves' departures.

Mary Boykin Chesnut from South Carolina is the most famous Confederate diarist, and her entries capture these particular moments and reactions. For example, on January 9th, 1864, she wrote, "The President's man, Jim," and here she's referring to Confederate President Jefferson Davis, so "The President's man, Jim, that he believed in as we all believe in our own servants, our own people as we are apt to call them, and Betsy, Mrs. Davis' maid, decamped last night. It is miraculous that they had the fortitude to resist the temptation so long. At Mrs. Davis,' the hired servants are mere birds of passage. First, they are seen with gold gloire, then their wings sprout and they fly to the Yankees." She continues to say, "I do not think it had ever crossed Mrs. D's brain that these two would leave her."

Another southern woman, Gertrude Thomas, wrote on June 12, 1865, quote, "I must confess to you my journal that I do most heartily despise Yankees, Negroes, and everything connected with them. Everything is entirely reversed. I feel no interest in them whatever," referring to her former slaves, "and hope I never will."

There's a lot that's happening in both of these passages. If you use them in your classroom, ask your students how these women felt about their relationships with the slaves before the war. How has that relationship changed? Let's identify, specifically, what the slaves are doing and how those women react. Students should be able to recognize the sense of betrayal, surprise, and then real bitterness that existed alongside their matter-of-fact rendition of events.

Of course, not all slaves could leave their farms and plantations. Often, when we talk about how African Americans aided the Union war effort, we only think about their participation in the army. We probably show a clip of *Glory* in our classrooms. But that's actually only part of the story. It's important to acknowledge in our classroom the actions of the millions of enslaved people who did not serve as soldiers. There were other, critical ways that enslaved people actively affected the war effort and the progress of the Civil War.

Slaves immediately recognized that with the Civil War, the slave system was breaking down, and they took multiple actions to further destroy it. So, we can look again at Jefferson Davis' own slaves. Jefferson Davis' brother fled from his plantation with a group of household slaves when the Union Army got close by. The remaining slaves took control of the two Davis plantations. They helped themselves to the valuables. They refused to work for anyone other than themselves, and in general, they kind of lived as free people on the Davis plantation for the better part of the war. And of course, the Davis slaves weren't the only ones making those decisions. Together, on plantations across the South, these open acts of rebellion made it difficult for the Confederacy to supply their troops on the front and the civilian population at home. Slaves on the Confederate home front actively conspired against the Confederacy. Stephanie McCurry reminds us that slaves often risked their own lives to provide valuable intelligence to the Union Army. They did things like give Confederate positions to Union soldiers, tell them how many Confederate troops were waiting for them ... They even provided cover for federal forces by leading them through swampy territories to surprise Confederates.

So, what happens is that the Confederate Army has to divert forces, kind of, to patrol plantations as they're also trying to fight the war. Stephanie McCurry notes the impact of this, saying, "The slaves determined war against their masters and their master states opened an internal front in the Confederate war and demanded the diversion of military resources to fight it." Fleeing to Union lines, refusing to work, sabotaging the Confederate war effort, these acts of open rebellion point to numerous ways in which enslaved people affected the war effort and contributed to their own emancipation.

All of us deal with the end of slavery as the most significant outcome of the civil war, but many of us in the past probably haven't considered the role that slaves played in bringing about the end of slavery. So, hopefully we're changing the story within our classrooms by having these different discussions about the multiple actions that enslaved people took to impact emancipation. And building on this work that we're doing in our classrooms, it's also important to consider what our larger national story of emancipation is.

How do we represent it to ourselves as a nation and as a people? We can do this by asking our students to critique a famous Thomas Ball statue that's entitled, alternately, "Emancipation Memorial" or "Freedman's Memorial." You can find images of it online. The statue was erected in Washington D.C. in 1876, right at the end of Reconstruction. It depicts Abraham Lincoln standing over a shackled slave who was down on one knee. Lincoln is gazing thoughtfully towards the slave. His right hand holds a copy of the Emancipation Proclamation. His left hand hovers over the enslaved man who is kneeling, naked except for a loin cloth.

To do this activity with students, it's important to first have them look carefully at the statue. Ask them "What do you see?", right? And it's not about interpretation here. It's not about analysis. It's literally about what is right in front of you. How is the enslaved person dressed? How is Lincoln dressed? What's the difference in the way their bodies are positioned? Once your students have done a good job really looking at the statue, then we can move on to those contextualizing and analytical questions.

Ask the students, "What do we think is the relationship between these men? What is each one doing?" And then we can ask, "What is the statue telling us? What does the relationship between these men mean?" And at the end of this questioning, students should realize that Lincoln is the one who has all

the power. He is the only one who is active in the statue. Lincoln is emancipating the slaves. And then we can ask them, “Thinking back on our discussion so far,” right?, “Is this accurate?” Students love to critique things, and so they will most likely pull the statue apart. I mean, it’s supposed to be the Freedman’s Memorial, but it’s really more of a memorial to Lincoln himself. I love Lincoln, and we call him the “Great Emancipator,” but he’s not the only one who was active. There were multiple great emancipators in this story.

As your students are doing this critique, you should ask them to provide evidence from your discussions of Abraham Lincoln, the free black population and the enslaved population to support their responses. Having determined the ways in which the statue is inaccurate, students should consider the implications of this narrative of emancipation. If we don’t recognize the ways that African American people contributed to the end of slavery, what impact might that have on the political future of African Americans? You can also extend this discussion by asking students to use their existing knowledge to create their own emancipation memorial. What should it look like?

After this memorial exercise, you can begin to conclude your classroom discussion of slavery and the Civil War with an examination of Abraham Lincoln’s eloquent Second Inaugural Address. Lincoln was sworn into office just three weeks before the end of the Civil War. When he addressed a crowd, he acknowledged that everyone knew that slavery was somehow the cause of the war, and he admitted that few believed the institution would end even before the conflict. But Lincoln continued on to posit that the war’s terrible human cost may have been God’s way of forcing the United States to serve penance for the sin of slavery.

Lincoln said, “Yet if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondsmens’ 250 years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with a sword. As was said 3,000 years ago, so still it must be said, the judgements of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.” Lincoln’s words are eloquent, so much so they’re carved in the wall of the Lincoln Memorial, but his remarks remain ambiguous. In somehow describing slavery as the cause of the war, and his attribution of divine will in determining the end of slavery, Lincoln leaves historians unsatisfied.

Through this work we can help students to flesh out the ways that slavery was at the heart of the secession crisis by highlighting those extant sources that we discussed surrounding the Fugitive Slave Acts and the succession crisis. Students can now articulate the complications that come with using state’s rights as an alternative explanation for the conflict. And by examining the ways that slaves seize the opportunities that came with the chaos of the war to free themselves and to proclaim their loyalty to the Union cause, teachers can also complicate the narrative of slaves being given their freedom, and instead help students to understand the ways that slaves helped to bring about and mold their own emancipation.

It’s really necessary for us to have these conversations, addressing the ways that we’ve either avoided or misrepresented our past, whether it’s done intentionally or just unthinkingly. As history teachers, we want to give our students the opportunity, not only to understand and engage in the past, but also to contribute to and impact the present.

You know, this subject, it’s not easy to talk about. These are complicated issues, but they’re not

so complicated that we can't deal with them historically. And if we can deal with their historical complications and understand those, then we can also equip ourselves and our students to deal with the complicated impact that the history of slavery has had on our present-day life. As a nation, we've allowed these partial, incomplete or confused narratives to play too much of a role in the way that we understand the Civil War and the way that we understand the end of slavery. We need to address this history, because we're living with the very real ramifications of our collective inaction over the past 150 years. We can't have a productive conversation about removing Confederate statues if we don't acknowledge what the Confederacy was about.

Similarly, if we don't acknowledge the massive impact that slavery and the enslaved had on our past, we can't see the impact that their legacies have had on our present. And maybe the first step towards righting the wrongs of today is getting the history right.

HASAN JEFFRIES

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Teaching Hard History is a podcast from Teaching Tolerance, with special thanks to the University of Wisconsin Press. They're the publishers of a valuable collection of essays called *Understanding and Teaching American Slavery*. In each episode, we're featuring a different scholar to talk about material from a chapter they authored in that collection. We've also adapted their recommendations into a set of teaching materials, which are available at Tolerance.org. These materials include over 100 primary sources, sample units, and a detailed framework for teaching about the history of American slavery.

Teaching Tolerance is a project of the Southern Poverty Law Center, providing free resources to educators who work with children from kindergarten through high school. You can also find those resources online at Tolerance.org.

Thanks to Dr. Jay for sharing her insights with us. This podcast was produced by Shea Shackelford with production assistance from Tori Marlin and Gregory Dann at Rockpile Studios. Our theme song is "Kerr's Negro Jig" by the Carolina Chocolate Drops, who graciously let us use it for this series. Additional music is by Chris De Brisky.

If you like what we're doing, please share it with your friends and colleagues, and consider taking a minute to review and rate us on iTunes. We appreciate the feedback. I'm Dr. Hasan Kwame Jeffries, associate professor of history at the Ohio State University and your host, and you've been listening to *Teaching Hard History, American Slavery*.