



Senator George S. McGovern

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On February 12, 2009, political figure, veteran, and historian Senator George S. McGovern spoke about his book, *Abraham Lincoln*. Sean Wilentz, editor of the Times Books American Presidents series, engaged Sen. McGovern in a lively conversation.

ADRIENNE THOMAS: Our moderator for tonight's event, Sean Wilentz, is the Sydney and Ruth Lapidus professor of the American Revolution era at Princeton University. He is general editor of tonight's book, and the author of "The Rise of American Democracy," which received the Bancroft prize in 2006.

Author/Senator George McGovern, a Midwesterner, former U.S. Senator, presidential candidate, veteran, historian by training. Earned his Ph.D. in American History and Government at Northwestern University. He served as ambassador to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization and is a recipient of the Presidential Medal of Freedom. Would you please welcome again Senator George McGovern and Professor Sean Wilentz.

[Applause]

SEAN WILENTZ: Thank you. Well, Senator, here we are again. Um--First, I have to say, it's a great pleasure to be here with all of you, and especially with a hero of mine like George McGovern. It's also an honor for me to be here because I'm a successor as a general editor of this series to Arthur Schlesinger Jr., who died last year, and who was another hero of mine and a close, close friend. And it is he who managed to convince--I'll let Senator McGovern tell the story--Senator McGovern to actually writing this very, very wonderful book about Abraham Lincoln--which would be a great book even if it wasn't the bicentennial. But the fact that it is the bicentennial today makes it all the more special. So we're going to talk for a little while about things Lincolnian and things about this book. And then we'll open it up to some questions from the audience. And then they get time for some book signing after that. And, Senator, I--well, just to start off--I



mean, since leaving office, you've written several books about many different topics, ranging from George W. Bush's foreign policy to your--your daughter Terry's tragic struggle with depression and alcoholism. Now you've written a biography of Abraham Lincoln. What led you to write this book?

GEORGE S. McGOVERN: Well, of course, I've always been a strong admirer of Abraham Lincoln, like most Americans. 16,000 books have been written about Abraham Lincoln. So I don't expect to turn the storm with my contribution. But the fact that that many books have been written indicates the interest this man not only generated in his own time, but for all the decades since then. These books have been spilling out in increasing numbers. The reason I got into this--Arthur Schlesinger, as Dr. Wilentz has said, was the editor in chief of this series in which every president, beginning with George Washington, would have a book written about them, primarily about their years in the White House. These are not definitive biographies. They're an analysis of what kind of a president, what kind of a person occupied the presidency during the appropriate years. And so Arthur wanted to know if I would do one of the books. Take my choice, I thought, from the way he spoke. And I told him, I just had enough on my plate right now that I really didn't need to write another book at this time.

I was on the lecture circuit and sometimes teaching at the same university for a period of time. And I just didn't feel up to writing another book right then. My wife was ill, and I was doing what I could to make life better for her. He said, "Look, you've got a doctorate from Northwestern University, and you've been telling me for years how much better Northwestern was than Harvard." [Laughter] "And so now I want to see you put your pen where your mouth is." I said, "Well, I'll tell you. I would do it if I could write on Abraham Lincoln. He's my political hero." He said, "Too bad. Bill Clinton has already spoken for Lincoln." He said, "This may surprise you, George. But a guy who actually was elected President--"[Laughter] "rates above somebody that was just nominated to the presidency." I said, "Well, if he changes his mind, let me know."

A year and a half later, he calls me early one morning. Said, "Bill Clinton has said he just can't do this book," and "Would you like to do it?" So, that's how I got into writing a book on Lincoln. I'm really glad that Arthur prevailed. And I was glad when Professor Wilentz replaced Arthur after Arthur's untimely death. I say "untimely" because he was only 88. [Laughter] And I now think that that's not very old. And I used to say when the subject of aging came up, "Well, it doesn't matter so much how long you live, it's what you do with the years you have." I don't say that anymore. I wanted to live a long time, not only because I'm enjoying life, but because there's so many things I still want to do.



And I'll quit on this next wrap-up sentence. I have teamed up with Bob Dole. I used to think he was the meanest partisan in the United States Senate. But I discovered that we had some things in common. We were both combat veterans in World War II. He was working his way up on the western side of Italy with the mountain division, and I was 25,000 feet up in the air flying in a bomber with people shooting at us every day.

Um--and so we had Veterans Affairs in common. Then I discovered that he had the same concern that I have about hungry people, especially hungry kids. And so we have teamed up on an effort to extend something like the American Federal School Lunch Program through the United Nations, with other countries helping to pay for it, until we've reached every hungry kid on the face of the earth. And that's one problem that's soluble. I came to the Senate thinking my major mission should be to work for peace in the world. I've now come to the conclusion that's insoluble, that people have been killing each other in increasing numbers every century since Cain and Abel and that it'll probably go on, although I'm still—still put myself in the peace camp. But I do think we can reach every hungry kid in the world every day with a good nutritious lunch. And if we achieve that, which Bob and I are determined we're going to do, it's going to transform life on this planet for the better. Now, that's something Lincoln, I think, would have supported.

WILENTZ: That's true.

McGOVERN: That's a long answer to why I wrote this book.

WILENTZ: Well, it's a very good answer.

[Applause]

McGOVERN: I promise, the next answer won't be so long.

WILENTZ: And it's an amazing program. And we'll get back to it, actually. But you mentioned that you're a--you are a trained historian, one of the very few trained historians ever to run for the presidency. In fact, another plug for another book--"The Great Coalfield War" is, to date, the definitive study of the Ludlow, or the Colorado mine battles that led up to the Ludlow massacre in 1914. The author sits to my right, stage left.

McGOVERN: Thank you.

[Applause]



But what I wanted to ask you is, how important do you think it is for political leaders and office holders to have a strong working knowledge of history? Not just the rhetorical window-dressing of, you know, using the words and having speech writers put them in, but a true understanding of history.

That's the--it's a two part question, so you can go on for a while. The second part is, have you ever seen historical awareness at work either in your own career, working through your own, you know, office-holding, or in the career of others doing the people's business? Well, I think knowledge and a sense of history is crucial to the kind of leadership that all of us would like to see in the White House or in the Senate or in the Congress.

I remember in 1960, in the first presidential debate in that campaign between then Vice-President Nixon and Senator John Kennedy, there were--the format, as I remember it, Sean, was that they had 3 prominent reporters who asked each of the candidates a series of questions for which they had one minute to answer. And one of the first questions came, as my memory tells me, from Sander Vanocur, who was then with NBC. And he said that, "Gentlemen, each of you have one minute to answer this question. What do you regard as your most valuable asset in the presidency if you were elected?" And Nixon gave a pretty good answer, rather persuasive, about his experience--Service in the House of Representatives, service in the United States Senate. Vice-President for 8 years, under President Eisenhower. Traveled to countries all over the world. It sounded pretty convincing to me. And I looked on the television screen at John Kennedy. He looked so young. Looked like a Harvard college student up there. And I wondered how he was going to handle Nixon. And he said, "I think if I have any one qualification for the presidency, it is my sense of history." He said, "By that, I mean the capacity to know what the great historical forces and movements and actions have brought the United States to a position of power and respect and influence in the world. And secondly, the capacity to discern what are the historical forces that are moving in our own day, and in the future years, the ones that we ought to oppose and the ones that we ought to support."

He had me after that answer. As a history student, a history teacher, I think it is important. In my own life, I think where history has informed some of my actions in the Senate and as a presidential contender was the Vietnam War. I had read several studies of Southeast Asia while I was a graduate student at Northwestern, including a book by Owen Lattimore, Professor at Johns Hopkins University, called, "The Situation in Asia." And that book opens with Dr. Lattimore saying, in effect, that Asia is out of control. In one country after another, the old forms of colonialism and imperialism were being challenged by grass roots efforts that cannot be stopped. The more sophisticated the weapons used against these revolutionary forces, the more humiliating the eventual defeat



because these are forces that cannot be stopped that are demanding the right to control their own country. So you had India pulling out of the British Empire--in a non-violent way, incidentally. You had the Dutch being forced out of Indonesia. You had other countries that had to give up their colonies. And in Southeast Asia, you had the beginning of Ho Chi Minh and his revolutionary followers who were called "guerrillas" by us. But they were a group of young men who were trying to get the French out of Indochina. They eventually had an army that they recruited largely from the villages and the countryside of 10,000 men. And when the French were finally forced out of Vietnam and Laos and Cambodia, the Japanese were the ones that did it, and they took their place. And they were in control of that area. So when we found ourselves at war with the Japanese, the Ho Chi Minh forces were our allies. Some of my fellow combat pilots who were shot down over the jungles of Southeast Asia were discovered by Ho Chi Minh and his forces.

And once they were identified, they were brought back to American lines. And so, I began to keep an eye on this movement out there--Ho Chi Minh. And I decided this was a no-win proposition. I thought we made a mistake in backing the French out there for 8 years. We ended up financing 80% of the cost of the French war to reassert their power to crush Ho Chi Minh and his forces. And I think that was a mistake.

And so, my opposition to the war in Vietnam began with what knowledge I had of the historical forces, as John Kennedy called them, that were moving out there in that part of the world.

Bill Fulbright knew some of these same things about history--Frank Church. Senator Greening, Senator Morris, and others. And we were the nucleus that began the anti-war movement that, after 58,000 young Americans were needlessly killed and sacrificed by people who were making bad judgments about how to handle the revolutionary forces out there. So that--that changed my life. And I also think it may have had something to do with my becoming a respected figure in the country, but also one that was widely assailed for being soft on communism.

WILENTZ: Let's go to a--let's go back to Lincoln—another hero of mine, who was also assailed, actually, in his time. You conclude your book, Senator, with the following words, which I think are very powerful. "We wish our leaders could be more like him. We wish we all could be." What, in your opinion, are the 2 or 3 things about Abraham Lincoln--or maybe the 2 or 3 things that he did--that make him so admirable in your mind?



McGOVERN: Number one, he was literally a self-educated man. He had one year of formal schooling. But in that one year, he learned to read. He learned to write. And he pursued those two talents--and they were more than talents. They were hard-earned achievements on his part. He read everything he could get his hands on. He read and read and thought and thought about what he was reading.

He learned to phrase his writings better than any other occupant of the White House. Possibly Jefferson and Woodrow Wilson were somewhere close to Lincoln in writing. But he was the best writer, I think, bar none, that ever served in the White House. I greatly admire a person that can do that coming out of the humble origins. And he did. He didn't have a Ph.D at Northwestern. He wasn't a professor at Princeton. He was a farm boy from Kentucky, Indiana, Illinois--the various places where he lived. But I admire that, I think, above almost anything else. I also admire Lincoln—I had always admired him as a statesmen, a man with vision for the country, a man who understood the great enduring values of the nation. But what I discovered as I did some reading myself about him, and some investigation—I discovered that he was also a very adroit politician. It's one of the reasons he had the capacity, even though he hated slavery--from the time he was a young man, he loathed the idea of people being enslaved. But he also knew that half the country didn't share that view.

And that's why he never joined the abolitionists. He didn't think you could do--in one fell swoop, end slavery in the United States. And he also thought the union had to stay together. So with those things in his mind, he approached the slavery issue in a compromising fashion. He told the South before the Civil War really got under way that he wouldn't touch slavery in the South. But he wanted them to understand, neither would he permit it to be introduced to any new state that came into the union.

No slavery in the great public domain belonging to the American people—the federal domain. You can continue in the South, but you're not going to see slavery anywhere else in the country. Now, Lincoln probably believed that--not probably, did believe that if slavery could be contained in the South, it would gradually lose its effectiveness, that it would be--the need to constantly replenish the land and so on, and it might die out of its own accord. But the point I'm making is that he made every reasonable effort, as a good politician would, not to carry the day on everything that he thought, but to push it as far as he thought he could go. And unfortunately, that didn't work. The South still began to secede. As soon as Lincoln was elected, he made clear, no slavery in the territories. They wouldn't accept that restriction on it, so--but I think the combination of statesmanship, the vision of where he thought the country ought to go, and then the ability to say it's going take time to do this.



By the way, I see some of that in Barack Obama, some capacity to compromise. Compromise is not a bad word if it's used constructively to get something done that otherwise you wouldn't get done. But I think you should have that vision that sees a better goal for the nation, as well as the capacity to move us there in steps, rather than to fail entirely.

WILENTZ: Yeah. I mean, "compromise" is a--is not always a--it's sort of a dirty word. And so is "politician," for that matter. I mean, I've seen on a website, the question, "Lincoln: Idealist or Politician?" As if he couldn't be both.

McGOVERN: He was both.

WILENTZ: But the fact--This was even true in Lincoln's day. I have a quotation here. I just want to read it for comic relief, if nothing else. Towards the beginning of his long career, actually--he was a politician for a very long time. Back in 1837, he was in the state legislature in Illinois more than 20 years before he was elected President. He rose in the legislature to oppose a movement that was to object to a resolution calling for an investigation of the Illinois State Bank. And he said as follows. This is perfect Lincoln. "Mr. Chairman, this movement is exclusively the work of politicians, a set of men who have interests aside from the interests of the people and who, to say the most of them are, taken as a mass, at least one long step removed from honest men."

[Laughter]

"I say this with greater freedom, because, being a politician myself, none can regard it as personal."

[Laughter]

Well, Senator, but Lincoln is also known--I mean, this is--on this day, of all days--as the great emancipator. And you talked about his compromise. But still, he is the known--certainly to schoolchildren--as the man who freed the slaves. Yet, as you discuss in this book, while he always hated slavery, his anti-slavery politics did evolve over the years. Can you talk a little bit about that evolution?

McGOVERN: Yes. He had no intention of an emancipation proclamation when the Civil War began. But about halfway through the war, he realized things were not going well. It was also brought to his attention that the--the negro slaves were, in effect, assisting the Southern side of the war effort. They were performing a lot of the labor that enabled other people who weren't slaves to sign up for service in the Confederate forces. He also thought that somehow, the very institution of slavery added real strength to the Southern cause. And he had felt



before that that he didn't have the constitutional power to strike down slavery in the South, where people regarded the slaves as property. And he--at least early in the war--I'd say the first couple of years of the war--he told just about everybody who approached him on this subject that he didn't have the power to put an end to slavery as President. But he finally decided as commander in chief of the armed forces, he could do things that ordinarily might be beyond the President's authority and that to save the union, almost anything was worth doing. And so, it was on the basis of his assumed war powers that he ordered emancipation of the slaves--not in the North or any other part of the country, only in the South, in the 11 states of the Confederacy. So his--he did evolve in his views towards the war. The 13th Amendment finally put an end to slavery everywhere in the United States.

WILENTZ: Well, you touched on the issue of war powers. And that's a--it's still an issue that we're thinking about, right? Um--And you do. I mean, you're very candid in the book. One of the reasons the book is so wonderful, actually, is that--there are many admiring books about Lincoln, and there are very many debunking books about Lincoln. This is a candid book about Lincoln that is also admiring. It was one of the reasons it was such a pleasure to edit. But you do criticize Lincoln for a number of things--suspension of habeas corpus, on the closing down of presses. Why don't you share some of your criticisms of his presidency?

McGOVERN: Well, I know why Lincoln suspended habeas corpus. I know why he shut down some of the newspapers. He was aware that all across the country were saboteurs, spies, people that were trying to disrupt the Northern war effort. Um--and I think that's why he thought he could lift some of the liberties that Americans had become accustomed to. My own view is that that was a mistake, to lift the writ of habeas corpus. That, after all, is a very precious part of the American liberty tree. It is the part that says if you're arrested some night, you're entitled to know why you're arrested. You're entitled to a judge, a justice of the peace, or somebody in the judicial world to hold a preliminary hearing and decide whether there is legitimate grounds for arresting you. I don't think that should be lifted in time of war. You can go ahead and arrest somebody that you expect is subversive or a danger to the State, but that person's entitled to know why they're arrested, and if it's a frivolous reason, you're free. You know, you can't be aware of what's been going on the last 8 years without realizing that there were some of our constitutional liberties that were lifted.

The Geneva Accords were ignored on the treatment of prisoners. This country shouldn't practice torture against any human being. The first place, the testimony's no good if somebody's tortured. Under the right amount of torture, you're going to tell them anything that comes in your head. But it's not very--it's



not very dependable. And so, with that mindset as I was writing this book, I suppose I was tough on Lincoln, but I don't think it was right for Abraham Lincoln to challenge important constitutional protections, even though it's in war. Maybe we need that protection more in wartime than we do in other times.

There's a certain amount of hysteria that goes with every war, a certain amount of desperation and win at any cost, and those are the times when we need the Constitution in full force. I always remind audiences that when a man is sworn in, or a woman is sworn in to the United States Senate or to the Presidency, they hold up that right hand, they put the other one on the Bible, and they swear to uphold the Constitution of the United States, not just in peace. Uphold the Constitution of the United States. If that's wrong for George Bush Jr. to violate, it's wrong for Abraham Lincoln to violate. And so that's my one criticism of the greatest man that ever sat in the White House.

WILENTZ: OK. One thing that he might have in common with other presidents, but--

[McGovern chuckles]

WILENTZ: I just mentioned Lincoln's humor. Um--and, you know, he's famous for all of the stories that he told and the rest. But, you know, the paradoxical side and you bring this out in the book, as well, about Lincoln's temperament--is that he was also subject to really black moods. I mean, he called them "the hypos." And you have written movingly about depression and difficulties with depression in your own family, with your daughter Terry, and I was wondering how, as an author, that aspect of Lincoln's character—that side of Lincoln's life--touched you, as well, and how you handled that as an author.

McGOVERN: Well, there's no doubt about the depression. Sometimes, Lincoln and his associates referred to it as melancholy. Now, real depression is not just a bad day. It's--you know, when I'm kind of down today, or something like that. Clinical depression is a desperate affliction. It can just lay you low. It can paralyze you in terms of your relations with other people. You lose your appetite. In some cases, you lose interest in people of the opposite sex. You're just down and out, and it's a miserable thing to happen to anybody. If you have a more complicated form of it--manic-depressive, where you have the highs and then the lows--Lincoln was not a manic-depressive.

He was sad, sad, sad--despondent when he went into one of these spells. And there was no Lithium, there was no Paxil, there was no Prozac, no electric shock therapy--nothing like that, that we have available today. So he would go into these spells through most of his adult life. And they'd last varying lengths of time.



He had one severe depression set in when Ann Rutledge, his fiancée, was--had an untimely death. He had the same thing happen to him when he and Mary Todd broke up and then eventually got back together. The war was on his back. There was a group of women that went to see him once during the Civil War. And while they were waiting to be ushered into the Oval Office, they heard Lincoln and a couple of men who were visiting with him laughing. And when they got in, the leader of the group said "Mr. President, we're honored to be received by you today, but we're disturbed that with so many of our young men dying out on the battlefields, both North and South, to hear you laughing at a time like this." And he said, "Well, ma'am, if I could not have an occasional laugh, my heart would break, and all the work of this office would cease."

So he was a person that bore a lot of emotional difficulty, and the fact that he was able to continue without medical help, without any relief, I think, is one side of his great strength. There are very few human beings who could have taken what he was up against and still direct this country as intelligently as he did. So his humor was obviously an effort to show another side of his nature. He worked at those humorous stories. My favorite one was when an opponent accused him of being two-faced. And Lincoln said, "Does the gentleman really think that if God Almighty had given me two faces, I'd be wearing this ugly one that I have on tonight?"

[Laughter]

I like that kind of humor.

WILENTZ: Very good. Well, I think we're at the time where we can take very, very brief questions and answers. There are microphones at either end of the--the staircases there. So please do. You're welcome to come and ask questions of Senator McGovern. But I just ask you to please keep them very brief, because we don't have much time and keep them in the form of a question--as on "Jeopardy."

McGOVERN: Am I going too long?

WILENTZ: No, you're doing fine. I want to make sure they don't. Shall we start at that end? Ma'am?

WOMAN: Thank you. Senator, I'd like to ask you to comment, if you would, on Lincoln's opposition to the Mexican-American War when he was in Congress. There seems to be very little attention given to that, as opposed to—rather naturally, I suppose--his role in the Civil War as President.



McGOVERN: Well, Lincoln opposed the war with Mexico. President Polk was then the President of the United States, and Lincoln was strongly against getting involved in a war with Mexico. He introduced what were called the spot resolutions, in which he was calling on President Polk to identify the exact spot where conflict began. And he was trying to show that our troops were in Mexico before theirs were threatening the United States. I think that has had pretty good treatment from historians. What would you say, Sean? Do you think it's been--

WILENTZ: There's been a lot--there's been some done on it. The good biographies do cover it. What's interesting is that Lincoln had a position--again, it goes to his being a politician. Because he was opposed to the entry into the war. He thought that we had overstepped our bounds. But while American troops were in harm's way, he always voted for supplies. And he was very clear about that. He didn't want to be seen as a person who didn't support the troops. But he--all through that period, he was. He introduced the spot resolutions. In fact, he got the nickname from his critics as "spotty Lincoln." That's how he was known. And if he had left Congress at that point and never come back, that's how he would be remembered to historians, if at all. But there's no question that he was--took a courageous stance, actually, in standing up to President Polk in that time when--you know, if you think there's been a great deal of "jingoism" around recent American military efforts, around the Mexican War was really the first time that you found that kind of mass manufactured jingoism out there.

Sir?

McGOVERN: Lincoln's friends, including his law partner, Bill Herndon, tried to talk him out of his opposition to the war. He thought it meant the end of his career.

WILENTZ: That's exactly right.

McGOVERN: And it did probably mean that he wouldn't serve in Congress more than one term.

WILENTZ: People were very angry at him in Illinois for all that. Yeah, sir?

MAN: To establish my bona fides, just let me say that in November, 1972, I was teaching at Harvard. [Laughter] I'd just like to ask you a personal question, sir. As we've seen, you were a highly decorated combat veteran, a genuine war hero. Yet, to the best of my recollection, that was never stressed during your campaign, and I wondered if you'd like to comment on that.



McGOVERN: Well, it was probably a political mistake not to make more of it. But I have to tell you, I've always felt--um--I don't know--a little embarrassed about talking about what a hero I was. And my daughters start laughing when I try to tell them what went on in my life during those years. So--and I was so strongly opposed to the Vietnam War that I think people just kind of fell into an assumption that I must be against all kinds of military conflict.

I've never had any doubts about the U.S. involvement in World War II. I thought Hitler was a madman who had to be stopped. He was gobbling up one country after another. After taking over most of Western Europe, he turned against the Russians and got almost to--well, he did get to Stalingrad and Moscow and Leningrad before he was turned back. So I've never had any regrets about my involvement in that war. And I suppose if I had it to do over again, I would talk about that a little more. I could use that as one of the reasons I'm cautious about committing young men in needless wars.

MAN: Thank you.

WILENTZ: And every war hero I have ever met is embarrassed about being called a hero, I must say. Sir?

MAN: Very quickly, Senator, Hitler would have greeted you as a liberator. Senator, I was privileged to be part of the 75th year symposium here in, I believe, 1995. I wonder, in your book about Abraham Lincoln, if you mentioned the formation of my state, West Virginia.

McGOVERN: No, I know that story, but I didn't. I don't believe it's in the book.

WILENTZ: I don't think it is, no.

McGOVERN: Here's my editor here.

[Laughter]

WILENTZ: The buck stops here, right?

McGOVERN: But I-- maybe I should have, because, first of all, you live in one of the most beautiful states in the Union, and it's always had an independent view.

WILENTZ: Sir?



McGOVERN: I'm a little puzzled as to what you meant that Hitler would have regarded me as a liberator.

MAN: Your B-24.

McGOVERN: Oh, the B-24, yeah. That's--that was the name of the plane that I--I jumped there for a moment.

[Laughter]

But you're quite right. I called that bomber that I flew the Dakota Queen. It was named after Eleanor--named for Eleanor, who died a couple of years ago, I regret to say. It's interesting—the commander of Ellsworth Air Force base in South Dakota, where the B-1 bombers are largely located--he named his plane the Dakota Queen. And he brought Eleanor out to the air base and said that, out of respect for her, and a little bit her husband, he was--he was picking up the name we had in World War II.

WILENTZ: That's great. A couple more. Yes, sir?

MAN: OK. Does your book address Lincoln's desire to repatriate the freed slaves back to Africa?

McGOVERN: Just very briefly because that never was going anywhere. It was an idea that he had, but it never really got off the ground. I guess there were a few people sent over, and it was a rather dismal result.

WILENTZ: As late as 1862--I'm being instructed from my other ear. As late as 1862, he is talking about the colonization idea in the State of the Union Address. So, it's there. The American Colonization Society had started as early as 1816, so it was there. It was, to my mind--and I think the Senator would agree--a kind of cockamamie idea, but it was one that had a certain force among both certain kinds of liberal-minded slave holders. Henry Clay was the head of the A.C.S. And Lincoln bought this idea, too, because, you know, remember, in the early 19th century, the idea that African Americans--blacks and whites could live together in harmony after slavery was thought to be crazy. I mean, so much had happened under slavery that it was thought that it would be impossible for these two colors to live together peaceably. And to my mind, one of the great achievements of American history--of Americans since—is that that proved to be untrue. And I think that Lincoln grasped--was beginning to grasp that at the end of his life and that, indeed, he may have been killed for that, because the very last public speech that he gave, he talked about a modified--a minimal amount of black citizenship for blacks who had fought on the Union side in the war. And he said



that he would be going through with that. And in the audience for that speech was one John Wilkes Booth, who said, "That means N-word citizenship. I'll put him through."

So, he may have given his life, in fact, for even being the first President of the United States ever to-- to open the possibility of the ex-slaves having freedom. Now I get to be a history professor for two minutes. Now back to the real questions. Yes?

MAN: Is there a lot of similarities between Andrew Jackson and Abraham Lincoln? In May, 1833, Jackson appoints Lincoln postmaster in New Salem, Illinois. What influences, if any, did Jackson have on Lincoln, and did Lincoln publicly acknowledge it or privately ever acknowledge those?

McGOVERN: Well, the only thing I'm sure of is that Jackson was not one of his heroes. He--first of all, they were in different parties. Jackson was an out-and-out Democrat and Lincoln was the founder of the Republican party. By the way, Sean, I don't know why Arthur Schlesinger thought that George McGovern would be an ideal person to write about the founder of the Republican party.

WILENTZ: I think that Abraham Lincoln was always Arthur Schlesinger's idea of a good Republican.

[Laughter]

McGOVERN: No, I don't think that Jackson had all that much of an influence on Lincoln.

WILENTZ: There were a couple of ways in which--you know, apart from signing the thing. Jackson did suppress nullification in South Carolina in 1832-1833. And when Lincoln faced a similar kind of crisis in Charleston Harbor in 1861, and he had to address it in his first inaugural, one of the--there were 3 things that he looked at to help prep himself for that.

One was a speech made by Henry Clay. One was a speech made by Daniel Webster--both Whigs, as he was. But the third was Jackson's proclamation about nullification. And on that, I think he learned a lot from Jackson, long after Jackson was off the scene. I mean, Jackson had been gone since 1845. But there were ways in which both Jackson's nationalism and Lincoln's nationalism actually, you know, co-joined. And I think at the end--you know, again, later on in his life, much as he came to regard Jefferson much more highly in the 1850s on "The Declaration of Independence," so at the very end, he was willing to see that--You know, Lincoln's an amazing man. He has many, many sides to him. He was able



to see that all the old partisanship could give way to an admiration for certain aspects of what--what Jackson had done. Or so I've argued in an essay, so it better be right.

[Laughter]

Anyway, more questions? Yes, sir?

MAN: Yeah. Obviously, in 1860, Lincoln was somewhat of an underdog in the Republican nomination process. Do you think he would have won the nomination under the rules that you reformed in the Democratic party?

[Laughter]

McGOVERN: Uh--you know, that's--that's one time when a little internal group of white, middle-classed, middle-aged males chose wisely.

[Laughter]

I think--I'm not against white, middle-classed, middle-aged males. I was one myself when I ran for President. Um--I think Lincoln would--would have done well with the present rules—the so-called "McGovern reforms," because he had great appeal to people at the grass roots level. And he was well received in his own state when he got out on the hustings. He--in those debates, when he was running for the Senate against Stephen Douglas, he developed a great following in Illinois and also nationwide. So I think he would have done pretty well with rules that opened up the nominating process to rank and file people of all kinds.

WILENTZ: I think like all great politicians, Abraham Lincoln would have adapted to whatever rules there were and done very well in 1860. Sir?

MAN: I've read a number of books in the series. I think it's excellent.

WILENTZ: Thank you.

MAN: I really enjoyed them, but they're very short. They're around 150 or so pages. I'm just wondering, Senator, with such a rich and broad subject as Abe Lincoln, what was the hardest part of producing a manuscript that could be thorough, but still relatively short?

McGOVERN: Well, I think the editors began with the late Arthur Schlesinger--I think their view was that these books, covering everybody from George Washington down to the present--that those books should be tightly written. They



should not omit fundamental things, but they should not have a lot of extra verbiage other than telling the main story. And they get a wider readership that way. You know, I have to say, even though I'm a compulsive reader, and have been most of my life, when I see a book that somebody tells me is worth reading that's 987 pages long--

[Laughter]

WILENTZ: Ouch.

McGOVERN: I--somehow, I tend to move that to the end of the--the shelf. I told President Clinton here a couple of years ago that I'm still trying to get through that...

[Laughter]

memoir of his. To a true academician and a great professor like Sean Wilentz, that's--he goes in for those thousand-page--

[Wilentz laughs]

WILENTZ: That's why I said "ouch."

McGOVERN: But I think--I think they're going to serve their purpose in being as brief as they are. I think mine was 165 pages--something like that.

WILENTZ: That's right, they're all about the same.

McGOVERN: They're all about in that range. But I've had people tell me that it's a very clear summation of the important things about Lincoln, and they appreciate being able to read it on an airplane ride to L.A. or whatever.

WILENTZ: The rule is, you buy it at Newark, and at LAX you're done.

[Laughter]

One more question. Sir?

MAN: Well, Senator McGovern, my late mother, Mary Slovenek and I admired your work as a dove during the Democratic National Convention in 1968 when we lived in Illinois. My name is Joe Slovenek. I put something about you in the Obama transition website because I wanted to ask you--did you have a plan to withdraw the U.S. troops in South Vietnam in, like, 3 to 6 months or so in 1969?



McGOVERN: Yeah, about 90 days.

MAN: OK, and could you please tell me what advice you could give to Barack Obama about ending the Iraq war, which I think is similar to Vietnam, and trying to construct a moderate to liberal coalition? Because he seems to be the most liberal nominee since you were nominated, although you were a veteran. And a lot of Illinoisans want Barack to create a coalition of liberals and moderates effectively, and I think he could use your advice. That's the reason I put it on the Obama transition website.

McGOVERN: Well, I think we all know the war in Iraq's been an utter disaster. That country was not the slightest threat to the United States. They had absolutely nothing to do with the 9/11 attack. But the theory now is that, well, we're there, anyway, and we can't leave until there's a stable situation. They had a very stable situation there when we invaded the country. It wasn't necessarily the happiest arrangement. You had a--you had a dictator in charge who was a first-class S.O.B., but...now you've got a country in chaos.

We've smashed most of the infrastructure of the country, killed probably a couple of hundred thousand Iraqis, lost nearly 5,000 young Americans. Um--our Nobel prize winning economist, Mr. Stiglitz, says this war, before we see the end of it--it'll be--will cost us \$3 trillion. So if I were the President of the United States, I'd try to wind it up as quick as possible. I don't mean just a mad break for the borders, but an orderly withdrawal. I would urge the Iraqis to bring in some extra law and order people--other Muslim countries that might help set up a temporary force there for the next couple of years to deal with the--any problems internally. And that's what I hope--I hope he would do.

I also hope he won't put the American army into Afghanistan.

I know--

[Applause]

I know during the campaign, he made several statements to the effect that that's what he would do, that he thought that the danger was not in Iraq but in Afghanistan, and that that's where we ought to concentrate our military effort. I don't see any issues in Afghanistan that justifies putting a major American military force. And everybody that's tried that has gone out with a lot of pain and injury and accomplished very little. The English tried for--a century ago to restore Afghanistan to some measure of stability, by English standards, and they finally gave up.



The Russians went in there in the 1980s. 100,000 crack troops, the best the Red army had. 10 years later, they limped out of there having lost 25,000 young Russian soldiers--a steady stream of coffins going back to Russia, and Russian parents weep for their children, the same as we do.

So that was a bitter experience for the Russians. Some of the Russian experts say it contributed to the collapse of the Soviet Union. It's frequently referred to as the Russian Vietnam. And so I don't--I don't want to see that repeated in Afghanistan, and I hope that--I hope that we won't go that route. I'm sure, in my own mind, it'll be like Iraq if we do.

WILENTZ: Lessons of history, lessons for leaders. Lessons from a very wise man. I want to thank you all for coming out tonight, and to thank Senator McGovern for an extraordinary evening.

[Applause]

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