Although one of the things Abraham Lincoln is celebrated for is the Emancipation Proclamation, which he issued in 1863, he didn't always believe that all slaves should be freed or that they should be granted citizenship after they were freed.

There was a period when he found it impossible to envision a biracial society, and he thought that former slaves should leave America and return to Africa.

The evolution of Lincoln's ideas about slavery is the subject of the new book "The Fiery Trial" by my guest Eric Foner. He's a professor of history at Columbia University and has written many books about the Civil War period. He's past president of the American Historical Association and the Society of American Historians. Did Lincoln always see slavery as unjust?

Mr. ERIC FONER (Author, "The Fiery Trial"; Professor of History, Columbia University): Lincoln said during the Civil War that he had always seen slavery as unjust. He said he couldn't remember when he didn't think that way, and there's no reason to doubt the accuracy or sincerity of that statement.

And even early in his political career, when he was in the Illinois legislature, he went out on a political limb considerably to issue a statement saying that slavery was unjust.

The problem arises when - with the next question: What do you do about slavery, given that it's unjust? And Lincoln, like many, many other Americans, took a long time to try to to figure out exactly what steps ought to be taken given that you thought it was unjust.

GROSS: I want you to read a statement that he made in the speech in Peoria in 1854. And just, like, let's start with the significance of this speech.

Prof. FONER: Well, 1854 is when his great rival, Stephen A. Douglas, forces through Congress the Kansas-Nebraska bill, which opens up a considerable portion of the Trans-Mississippi West to the possible expansion of slavery.

And Lincoln, like many other Northerners, was quite outraged by this, and he comes back into public prominence as a leading spokesman against the westward expansion of slavery.

In doing so, he talks about the evil of slavery in and of itself, not just its westward expansion but why he considers slavery fundamentally unjust.

GROSS: There's a paragraph in which he describes that, in which he lays that out that I'd like you to read.

Prof. FONER: Right. He this is Lincoln's words at Peoria, referring to Douglas' willingness to see slavery spread into the West. Lincoln says:

*(Reading)*

This declared indifference, but, as I must think, covert, real zeal, for the spread of slavery, I cannot 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, causes the real friends of freedom to doubt our sincerity, and especially because it forces so many really good men among ourselves into an open war with the very fundamental principles of civil liberty, criticizing the Declaration of Independence, and insisting that there is no right principle of action but self-interest.

You know, that little paragraph somehow condenses so much of Lincoln's thinking about slavery. Slavery is a monstrous injustice. You know, that's the language of abolitionists, not of politicians. It's a very extreme statement against the institution.

But then he goes on to other, you might say, more practical issues. It makes the United States look ridiculous in the world. We claim, ever since the American Revolution, to be the exemplar of freedom and justice in the world, and yet we have this giant slave system, and it enables the enemies of democracy to say, well, these Americans are just hypocrites. They don't really believe in their own founding principles.

GROSS: So hearing this, you might think, well, so Lincoln wanted to abolish slavery. But he wasn't, as you pointed out, he wasn't then an abolitionist. And in another paragraph from the same speech, he says some things that I think will surprise many Americans, surprised me.

Prof. FONER: Right, well, he goes on to say, well, okay, slavery is wrong. What should we do about it? And here he candidly admits that he doesn't have the answer to that question.

If all the earthly power were given to me...

GROSS: You're going to read another excerpt from the speech here?
Eric Foner’s Fiery Trial  (BEFORE Reconstruction)
Prof. FONER: Yeah, right. This is from the Peoria Speech again. By the way, the Peoria Speech is the longest speech Lincoln ever gave. Many of his speeches, like the Gettysburg Address, are models of succinctness. I think the Gettysburg Address took two minutes. The Peoria Speech took a couple of hours. And Lincoln is kind of thinking through his own position on slavery here. And this is what he said:
(Reading) If all earthly power were given me, I should not know what to do as to the existing institution. My first impulse would be to free all the slaves and send them to Liberia, to their own native land. But a moment’s reflection would convince me, that whatever of high hope, as I think there is, there may be in this, in the long run, its sudden execution is impossible.
What then, free them all, and keep them among us as underlings? Is it quite certain that this betters their condition? Free them and make them politically and socially our equals? My own feelings will not admit of this; and if mine would, we well know that those of the great mass of white people will not.
Whether this feeling accords with justice and sound judgment, is not the sole question, if indeed, it is any part of it. A universal feeling, whether well or ill-founded, cannot be safely disregarded. We cannot, then, make them equals. It does seem to me that systems of gradual emancipation might be adopted; but for their tardiness in this, I will not undertake to judge our brethrens of the South.
Again, here are some remarkable comments by Lincoln which really epitomize his views into the Civil War. Slavery ought to be abolished, but he doesn't really know how to do it. He's not an abolitionist who criticizes Southerners. He says: I'm not going to judge these Southerners for not taking action. His first impulse, he said, is to free them and send them back to Liberia. At this point, Lincoln does not really see black people as an intrinsic part of American society. They are a kind of an alien group who have been uprooted from their own society and unjustly brought across the ocean. Send them back to Africa, he says. And this was not an unusual position at that time.
GROSS: Yeah, let me stop you here. We'll get more into this idea of colonization a little bit later. Now you mentioned that Stephen Douglas, who was Lincoln's adversary, interpreted the Declaration of Independence as applying to white people. Even though it didn't explicitly say that, that's what the Founding Fathers meant. That's what Jefferson meant.
But I'm wondering how Lincoln interpreted the Declaration of Independence when it said all men are created equal. Did he think it meant all white men?
Prof. FONER: No, Lincoln always insisted that that phrase meant everybody. The question is: what does it mean when you say they’re created equal?
And during the great Lincoln-Douglas debates, Douglas constantly is badgering Lincoln, saying Lincoln is a believer in Negro equality. That was like the nuclear weapon of politics back then. And Lincoln had to deny it, and he did deny it. The statements that most disturb Lincoln's admirers come out of the Lincoln-Douglas debates, where he explicitly denies believing in blacks having the right to vote, right to serve on juries, right to intermarriage with white people.
**Well, what, then, did equality mean?** *Lincoln says he's very specific about it. Equality means the right to improve your condition in life* , as he had, of course, growing up from very modest circumstances. Black people, he always insists, should have the right to the fruits of their labor, the right to improve their condition in society. That's why slavery is wrong, and on that ground, he said, they are equal to everybody. But these other rights, political rights, civil rights, are conventional rights, which the majority of society, you know, has a right to regulate. So women, for example, do not have the right to vote, but that doesn't mean they should be slaves.
Now, so Lincoln makes that distinction. To us, it sounds like an untenable distinction, really. How can you improve your condition in life if you lack all legal rights, as blacks in Illinois basically did? And Lincoln had not yet thought that through. It's not until well into the Civil War that Lincoln really begins thinking seriously about the future role of black people in American society.
But on this question of black equality, he's walking a tightrope between his belief in a basic equality of all people and, on the other hand, his unwillingness to challenge the racist views of his state, which was a deeply racist state, Illinois at that time.
Eric Foner’s Fiery Trial (BEFORE Reconstruction)

You know, it was illegal for black people to enter the state of Illinois in the 1850s. The white population of Illinois did not want any blacks around, slave or free.

GROSS: Before the Emancipation Proclamation, Lincoln was a supporter of colonization. Why don't you explain the concept of colonization for former slaves.

Prof. FONER: Colonization was the belief that former slaves should become free. It's an anti-slavery position. It's a way of abolishing slavery. Slaves should be freed and, depending on who you are, either encouraged or required to leave the United States. They should be sent to Africa, to Central America, to Haiti.

Lincoln did not believe in involuntary deportation, but he certainly advocated policies which envisioned the large majority of the black population leaving for some other place. And from about 1852, when he first publicly advocated this, until the Emancipation Proclamation, over 10 years later, Lincoln consistently made clear his belief in this colonization policy.

Colonization, you might say, was a way of envisioning the end of slavery without confronting the question of America as a biracial society. In other words, you would eliminate the black population, and therefore, you didn't have to think about what their status would be once slavery ended.

And Lincoln's two great political heroes Henry Clay and Thomas Jefferson were strong advocates of colonization. Clay and Jefferson were both anti-slavery slave owners. They owned slaves, they hated slavery, they came up with this scheme, which doesn't seem very realistic to us, obviously, that slavery could be gradually abolished with the colonization of the freed slaves. And Lincoln adopts that policy as the 1850s goes on.

We talked a little bit about how Abraham Lincoln, before signing the Emancipation, believed in colonization, that all African-Americans in the United States, including freed slaves, should be sent to Africa or South America or the Caribbean because whites in America weren't ready to accept African-Americans as equals.

Lincoln also believed in gradual emancipation. What was his idea of gradual emancipation? And this was, again, before he signed the Emancipation Proclamation.

Prof. FONER: Well, you know, gradual emancipation was the way emancipation generally happened in the 19th century. That's how it had been abolished in the Northern states, very gradually, over decades. You know, in New York state, the law for emancipation was passed I think in 1799, and slavery didn't really totally end until 1827. That's almost 30 years of emancipation.

In many Latin American countries, after the wars for independence there, these gradual emancipation laws were passed. In other words, the immediate emancipation of large numbers of slaves was seen by many people as something that would be so disruptive to society and the economy that it would be very dangerous and counterproductive.

So before the Emancipation Proclamation, that was also Lincoln's idea, that gradual emancipation meant that basically the children of slaves would become free after a certain date, maybe 20 years in the future or something like that.

Now, the thing we have to remember about emancipation, you know, we think of the Civil War and the Emancipation Proclamation, but before that, there was no way to emancipate the slaves of the United States without the consent of slave owners. Slavery was protected by the Constitution. It was protected by state law. The federal government couldn't just say okay, the slaves are freed. To get the consent of slave owners, people like Lincoln thought you had to, A, do it gradually, B, pay them compensation, monetary compensation for the...

GROSS: Pay the slave owners.

Prof. FONER: To the owner, not the slave, the owner for the loss of his property right in his slaves. The British had done that when they abolished slavery in the West Indies. And colonization is also part of that. In other words, you assure these slave owners that they won't have a large, free, black population around, which most of them didn't want to have.
Eric Foner’s Fiery Trial  (BEFORE Reconstruction)

So that's Lincoln's position, and it's Henry Clay's position, and it's the position of many people up to the Emancipation Proclamation. What's interesting about the Emancipation Proclamation is it completely repudiates all of those previous ideas. It's a new departure for Lincoln. It's immediate, not gradual. There is no mention of compensation. The slave owners are not going to get any money anymore. And there is nothing in it about colonization. After the Emancipation Proclamation, Lincoln says nothing publicly anymore about colonization.

He does think, well, yeah, if people want to leave voluntarily, that's up to them, and maybe as a kind of safety valve, yeah, let them go somewhere. But it's no longer a government policy that he is promoting. So the Emancipation Proclamation represents a complete reversal of Lincoln's previous views about how to get rid of slavery.

GROSS: So what led to that reversal in his ideas about how to get rid of slavery?

Prof. FONER: Well, that's what my whole book is about: many, many things. Many, many things. I think the failure of his previous plan. You know, the problem was he presented his previous plan to the border slave states, the four slave states that remained in the Union: Kentucky, Missouri, Delaware and Maryland. And they said no, absolutely not.

For two years, he tried to get them to adopt this gradual plan, and they said no, Lincoln, you don't understand. We don't want to get rid of slavery. We want to keep our slaves. So we're not interested in any plan that envisions the end of slavery. Moreover, black people, as I said, by and large did not want to leave the country. So in other words, this plan the people who were to be involved in this plan, both slave owners and slaves, said no, we don't like this idea of Lincoln's.

Second of all, slavery was already disintegrating in the South. No matter what Lincoln said, as soon as the Union Army went into the South, slaves began running away from plantations to Union lines. And this forced the question of slavery onto the national agenda. Almost from the very beginning of the Civil War, the federal government had to start making policy, and quickly they said: Well, we're going to treat these people as free. We're not going to send them back into the slave-holding regions. So a policy is sort of getting out of control because of events. And finally, very important, as the war goes on, Lincoln begins to realize that they need more and more manpower. And one of the things about the Emancipation Proclamation is it opens the Army to the enlistment of black men for the first time, really.

And by the end of the Civil War, 200,000 black men have served in the Union Army and Navy. And envisioning blacks as soldiers fighting for the Union is a very, very different vision of their future role in American society than saying, well, you should leave the country. And it's the black soldiers and their role which I think really begins as the stimulus to Lincoln's change in racial attitudes and in attitudes towards America as an interracial society in the last two years of his life.

GROSS: Because they fought so well, they did such a good job, yeah...

Prof. FONER: Yeah, fighting for the nation gives you a stake in citizenship. Lincoln comes to believe that, as many, many Northerners do. The role of black soldiers is critical in changing attitudes about what their status is going to be after the war is over.

GROSS: So are you saying that it was a kind of like ulterior motive, in a way, to the Emancipation, to be enabled to enlist African-Americans in the Union Army?

Prof. FONER: Well, that's part of it. Lincoln always says, you know, why should they enlist unless we give them the promise of freedom? You know, and then later on, when people are urging Lincoln to rescind the proclamation, Lincoln says: How can I do that? We have promised these men in the Army freedom. How can we go back on that now that they have risked their lives and fought and died for the Union? So it's not exactly an ulterior motive. It's a motive. It's pretty straightforward. It's not ulterior at all. The Emancipation Proclamation was a recognition that the previous way of fighting the war had failed, the previous policy on dealing with slavery had failed, and if there's one element of greatness in Lincoln, it's this willingness to change, this ability to grow, this not being, you know, wedded to a policy once it is proven to have failed.
Eric Foner’s Fiery Trial (BEFORE Reconstruction)

And Lincoln has this tremendous open-mindedness, this willingness to listen to criticism and this, you know, ability to change his course when he sees that the old policy is just not working.

Were there constitutional questions that were raised by Lincoln's opponents about freeing the slaves? Wasn't the Constitution seen as supporting slavery?

Prof. FONER: Well, slavery is in the Constitution. The word slavery is not there until the 13th Amendment, which abolishes it. But it certainly - I mean the fugitive slave clause says slaves have to be sent back if they escape, the three-fifths clause gives the South added representation for part of its slave population. There's no question that as a state institution, slavery is protected by the Constitution. And so what gives Lincoln the authority to issue this order freeing most - not every single one - but most of the slaves in the South and, of course, it is issued as a military order. Lincoln issues it as commander-in-chief, in other words, it's to promote the military success of the Union Army. And Lincoln says that what gives me the authority to take military measures and emancipating the slaves is a military measure to undermine the ability of the Confederacy to fight this war.

There were those, including Lincoln himself, at some points, who say that maybe the Supreme Court might even overturn this in the future. In fact, that's why eventually they abolished slavery through the 13th Amendment, a Constitutional amendment which is, you know, beyond reproach as a way of getting rid of the institution of slavery. But in the midst of the Civil War, Lincoln's position is, I have the ability, as commander and chief of the armies, to take any step that is necessary to ensure military victory, and this is one of them.

GROSS: A lot of people think that President Lincoln freed all the slaves in the United States with the stroke of a pen - all the slaves in the United States and the Confederacy with a stroke of a pen. But you say it really wasn't quite that way, that it didn't free all the slaves.

Prof. FONER: No, hardly. Lincoln hardly freed all the slaves. It didn't apply to the border states, and it didn't...

GROSS: Why not?

Prof. FONER: Because they were still in the Union. In other words, this is a military measure aimed at winning the war. The border states are not at war with the United States, right? They are members of the Union, so therefore, they still preserve the constitutional protections of slavery. Then Lincoln exempted a few areas of the Confederacy, the whole state of Tennessee, a couple of other areas. That was mostly to try to win over support from white southerners who might come back to the Union, he felt, if they might keep their slaves. So if you look at, there were three 3.9 million slaves at this time, in the U.S. The Proclamation applies to about 3.1 million of them. So there's 800,000 who just are not declared free at all.

Then, of course, it's hard to implement the Proclamation at the time it is issued because it's the Union Army that has to enforce it and the Union Army is not present in much of the South. But what the key to the Proclamation is, it makes this a - now a responsibility of the Union Army. Wherever the Union Army ventures, part of their job now is to protect the freedom of the former slaves. So it makes abolition an aim of the Civil War, which it had not been up to the issuing of the Proclamation.

GROSS: What power did Lincoln even have over the South and over slave owners and slaves? Because these states had seceded. They weren't...

Prof. FONER: Well...

GROSS: They didn't see themselves as part of the United States anymore.

Prof. FONER: Lincoln, of course, denies that these states have legally seceded. Succession is not legal, he says. They are part of the United States, he argues. But, of course, he's also waging war against them as a belligerent power. So ultimately, the power is military. You know, that's it. If the Union wins the war the nation will be preserved and the slaves will be free. If the Confederacy wins the war, which is certainly not impossible, the nation will be severed and slavery will continue to exist. There's absolutely no question that had the Confederacy won, slavery, despite all the pressures it was under, would've continued to exist for a long, long time. You know, so this was really a, you know, in the balance, as the Civil War was being fought.
Eric Foner’s *Fiery Trial* (BEFORE Reconstruction)