Michael Poliakoff:

Good afternoon. I'm Michael Poliakoff, the President of The American Council of Trustees and Alumni. I welcome you to Higher Ed Now. We have a most distinguished visitor today to be with us for this program. Lucas Morel is the John K. Boardman Professor of Politics at Washington and Lee University, where he has been since 1999. I think that's almost a record in the academy today to have had such longevity and such a brilliant and rich career at one place.

Lucas Morel is the Head of the Politics Department. He's also a major contributor to the Ashbrook Center, which does such wonderful programs, especially in the professional development of America's school teachers. He's a trustee of the Supreme Court Historical Society. He's a member of the U.S. Semiquincentennial Commission, and something that is not so well known, but for which I am extremely grateful, all of ACTA, is grateful, he is a member of our National Commission on American History and Civic Education.

We are just about to release our Broadside for the Nation, a document on the preparation of college students for informed citizenship. One more thing that I want to announce for the future, Dr. Morel has contributed an essay to a forthcoming volume that ACTA will be publishing with Stone Tower Press called A Nation Born in a Day: Visions of the American Founding, in which he goes into great detail and analysis of the failures of the 1619 Project with a particular focus on the contributions of Douglass to the American story.

With that, let's begin, Lucas, if I may, by talking about this wonderful new book that you have produced with Jonathan White called Measuring the Man, a study of the documents, the letters and speeches of Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass. So over to you. It's a wonderful book. I have enjoyed delving into it immensely. Tell us more about it, please.

Lucas Morel:

Yes, thank you. Thank you for having me. Measuring the Man: The Writings of Frederick Douglass on Abraham Lincoln began in my mind and Jonathan's as a 40,000 word compilation of some of the things that Douglass wrote about Lincoln, and it turns out there's a lot. And so, we decided to make it a compendium or anthology of everything that, as far as we know, is extent that Douglass wrote or spoke that's been written down.

It begins with his comments about the House Divided speech, Lincoln's acceptance of the Republican Party nomination to unseat Stephen Douglas in 1858, all the way through well past Lincoln's assassination in 1865, up until a year before Douglass dies. He dies in 1895. We have Douglass still talking about Lincoln about a dozen or so times between 1866, '65 and 1894. So Lincoln is on the brain, one great orator to another.

This book was truly a labor of love of ours, and in particular, eight of them have never been seen since they were first uttered, especially during the Civil War time. And so, we were really excited to come out with this book last year.

Michael Poliakoff:

This is such a wonderful contribution. I want to focus for a moment on the title so well-chosen of Measuring the Man. That also is making me very, very eager to talk with you a little bit, not about Frederick Douglass and Abraham Lincoln, but your other specialty, which is the writing of Ralph Ellison.

Lucas Morel:

Oh, wow.

Michael Poliakoff:

Because I think what I'm seeing here is a real focus on the ambiguities of history and of American life. You framed even the title so well to bring us to that recognition that these are not simple people. These are complex issues.

Lucas Morel:

Yes.

Michael Poliakoff:

Pragmatism, idealism, and the search for that more perfect Union.

Lucas Morel:

Yeah. This was fun and a bit challenging for us. Everybody knows that both Lincoln and Douglass are masters of, shall we say, the King's English. Especially, I got to say Frederick Douglass. He wears his reading more on his sleeve as it were than Lincoln does. Lincoln keeps it pretty simple, and Douglass likes to show off. We were finding things that were really obscure that through the good graces of Google, we were able to find out that, my goodness, he's quoting Christian hymns I've never heard of, Shakespeare all over the place.

But what we couldn't find was a pithy phrase, or clause, or sentence that captured what our book was doing. Our book is neither a hagiography. It's not like we're only going to record all the things where Douglass hails Lincoln, nor is it a hit piece on Lincoln, which is the favorite thing for many historians to do these days. Let's find out ways to take down our heroes.

Then Jonathan remembered a very well-known speech, which I've taught every year for over 20, 30 years, and it's his eulogy to Lincoln on the dedication of the Freedman's Memorial in Washington DC, April of 1876, where he says, "Measuring him, we measured him." Jonathan said, "That's it," and then he texted me and he said, "What about this?" I said, "That's perfect because it's precisely what the reader will find in Measuring the Man."

We're going to see Douglas's evolving, waxing and waning assessment of Lincoln between 1858 and 1894, but especially during the Civil War years, 1860 when he becomes elected to president, first Republican president in American history, and then through his assassination in 1865. John doesn't like it when I say this, but kind of an alternate title of our book would be Mad at Lincoln, because as much as he liked and at certain times adored Lincoln, there was always something where Douglass was like, "Lincoln's just not enough or isn't going as fast, is not as comprehensive or thorough-going as I would like him to be."

Because he's an abolitionist, right? Douglass is an abolitionist. Lincoln never claimed to be an abolitionist. He was anti-slavery, but there was a difference. They had a fundamental difference in terms of how they understood the federal government's authority over the domestic institution, the state institution of slavery, where Douglass thought the government pretty much had plenary authority over it, treating it as an existential threat as it were, or should.

Lincoln said, "No, there's this thing called federalism. States have authority and this is a state institution." The federal government is only empowered to attack it in terms of an international scope. So foreign trade, yes, we can prevent it from coming in the country after a certain time, 1808. It's expansion, yes, Congress has authority to regulate or even ban slavery in the territories, but it can't touch it in the states. And so, that was a fundamental difference between them in terms of their construction or interpretation of the Constitution.

Michael Poliakoff:

This touches on one of those major controversies in how we do history. I guess I kind of came of age in scholarship when you'd put air quotes around the "Great Man Theory" of history as if the great individuals don't matter at all, only a series of forces, impersonal abstract forces. I was really uncomfortable with that from the beginning. Of course, the whole notion of biography really began to weaken.

I think we could give a lot of credit maybe to David McCullough for letting us see that the study of the great individuals in history, men or women, was something that really illuminates not only their exemplary lives, there's a little bit of Plutarch, I confess, buzzing around in my brain, but also a sense of the time as well, and how those characters interacted.

This wonderful blend of critique and praise of Lincoln is such an insight into, in a sense, historiography.

Lucas Morel:

These writings are divided more or less chronologically and by topic. We have the pre-Civil War Lincoln, there's only a few things, 1858 through 1860. Then most of the speeches, editorials, and correspondence, especially with British abolitionists, eight letters that we've never seen since the 1860s, that is divided into pre-Emancipation Proclamation and post-Emancipation Proclamation. Then it's the postwar Douglass and then excerpts from Douglas's third autobiography that was published in 1881.

The historiographical part is what we're telling the readers, we have introductions for each of the sections, but we want them to read Douglass in real time and see how he is not simply opining on Lincoln, but he's opining with a purpose. He's trying to shape legislation, he's trying to shape public opinion so that things move quicker than the powers that be. We have our interpretation.

We keep it pretty concise in these introductions, and we just let the record, at least a historical record as far as Douglass is concerned, and he's not the only person opining about the president, we let Douglass speak for himself and let the reader judge the accuracy and the astuteness of Douglass' concerns with Lincoln on the subjects of say, enlistment of Black soldiers, or to preserve the Union into a war for abolition, how can these things be leveraged to full citizenship, especially the vote, and in particular for Black men, and he's very particular about that, knowing that universal suffrage was just a nonstarter in the 1860s.

These are matters that Douglass is absolutely concerned with working towards. Eventually, in the 1876 eulogy, Jonathan and I are reading of that speech, we think that Douglass, as strong-minded as he was and strong-willed as he was, he concedes in that speech that Lincoln was right. We can get into that more later if you'd like, but it's one of those rare occasions where someone who is definitely rock ribbed in his opinions concedes after the fact that someone he had criticized fiercely during the war actually exercised a prudence that produced the great victories that were emancipation and the preservation of the United States.

Michael Poliakoff:

It was an enormous challenge. I think back to one of the Lincoln/Douglass debates when Abraham Lincoln is responding to a hypothetical interlocutor who argues that slavery is okay because the white race is just superior. Lincoln says, "Be careful. Somebody else can come along and say, I'm smarter than you are," I'm paraphrasing here, "And so you have to be my slave."

And so, we're seeing already the crystallization of Lincoln's thoughts about the inherent immorality of this tempered by the fact that there would've been plenty of people in the North who would have praised him for cutting a deal with the South. Please elaborate on that. I'm giving a very rough outline.

Lucas Morel:

No, no, no, but it's true in the germ. Stephen Douglas was a categorical white supremacist. He made no bones about it. One of his favorite pet phrases was "white basis", that this country was founded on the white basis by white men, for white men, and said essentially that Blacks would never be citizens, could never be citizens of this country. He echoed Chief Justice Roger Taney's notorious opinion in 1857, the Dred Scott v. Sanford case, which said that Blacks had no rights and the white man was bound to respect.

Douglas essentially was saying that it's not just Blacks, but Native Americans, what he called Coolies, and the Chinese. He was an equal opportunity discriminator as it were. On Christmas Eve day after Lincoln's elected, December 24th, he actually proposes two amendments to the Constitution, which would've been our 13th and 14th Amendments. I'm going to just focus on one line from the opening of the 14th Amendment.

Now today, we're talking 14th Amendment because of birthright citizenship, but it's most famously known, the one that actually gets ratified, for the Equal Protection Clause, right? Well, Douglas had nothing to do with equal protection. His proposed 14th Amendment in hopes of coaxing South Carolina back and preventing succession snowballing that secession winter before Lincoln becomes president on March 4, 1861, his proposal is this:

Clause 1, Section I, Article 14: 14th Amendment would have been to ban Blacks from every political office, everyone from federal down through state, county, municipal, that Blacks could never hold political office in the United States. Talk about systemic racism. There is systemic racism. And they would forever be banned from voting. Black, or I think the word used was Negro, and mixed race.

So Douglas said, "Maybe this will convince the South that we really aren't going after the peculiar institution. We should make it part of the Constitution to prohibit Blacks from even voting." Now, if you know Douglas, up until December 24, 1860, what is he known for? What he called popular sovereignty, which is that local white majorities could determine what the rights and privileges of Black people are. In New York, they let them vote. That's crazy, Douglas thought. We would never do that in Illinois, but I will fight tooth and nail for their right.

White people's right in New York to determine whether Blacks should vote or not. We don't let them vote in Illinois. We don't let them serve on juries where whites are defendants. We don't let them serve in the militia. And down in Mississippi, of course, they enslaved them. We don't do that here, but let's know that in America, local popular sovereignty, which means white males get to make the rules, that's the American way, that's the way of freedom.

That's what Lincoln is facing in December of 1860, within a month and a half after he gets elected. That categorical white supremacy was what Lincoln was fighting against in the free state of Illinois in his debate with Stephen Douglas. And so, let me just mention one more thing along those lines. The most powerful politician between 1850 and 1860 is Stephen Douglas. He passes the Kansas Nebraska Act. He's the one who manages to do what Clay was unable to do in 1850, was to cobble together the compromise measures and get them voted on Sariadom (phonetic) one after the other.

The important thing, why did Lincoln see a white Northern Senator as the threat rather than a white Southern slaveholding senator? It's because Stephen Douglas was tempting white people in the North not to care what happens to Black people out in federal territories. Lincoln was trying to point out to people, "Don't you realize that that's actually going to produce the nationalization of racial slavery in the United States without anybody even making an argument for it? Just teach free whites in the states not to care." Douglas called this The Don't Care policy.

So Lincoln said he's teaching them not to care what happens to Blacks way out in the Western territories. Lincoln says, "You're going to go to sleep in free Illinois and wake up in slave state Illinois because that, coupled with the Dred Scott case, is going to produce a federal right to slavery, which means even state laws and state constitutions will not be able to ban slavery." So Douglas was the threat in 1860, that was his target, and Lincoln was able to more or less run the table of the free states in terms of their electoral college votes and get elected with only 39-ish percent of the American popular vote.

Michael Poliakoff:

And it is one of the sobering reminders that were it not for the military success of Ulysses Grant, Lincoln could well have lost the election to somebody who would've cut a deal and would have allowed for the ongoing slavery of the South. This was all kind of a razor's edge and it seems only at the Emancipation Proclamation, am I right, that Frederick Douglass is willing to see maybe Abraham Lincoln really does have a certain amount of at least pragmatic wisdom, even if he's let us down on the agenda that I wish he had of being a moral tiger about this.

Lucas Morel:

Yeah, I think that's true as far as it goes, but with Douglass, he's never satisfied. As much as he thought he'd never seen his lifetime, an American president endorsing emancipation, and with Lincoln, of course, you get the Emancipation Proclamation which applies to most of the enslaved Blacks on American soil, not those in loyal border slave states like Missouri, Kentucky, Maryland, and Delaware, and Tennessee. Tennessee is not included because by that point in time, it's under military authority.

Lincoln's future vice president, Andrew Johnson, the military governor, he's the only senator from a seceding state, Tennessee, who continues to show up for work. He does not believe in secession. And of course, he hates the elite planter class. So Douglass is ecstatic about January 1st, 1863. He thinks it's going to supersede July 4th. In one of his statements, he thinks it's even better than Independence Day as a holiday or as a date in world history, if you will, precisely because now it shows that we actually mean what we say, "All men are created equal."

So it's kind of a two and a half cheers out of three for Lincoln. I would say even as late as September 1st, and that's an important date, September 1, 1864, Douglass, while he hopes Lincoln will win, he's concerned that Lincoln is not doing enough to win the war. He doesn't know, of course, the telegram that Sherman is going to send Lincoln that day that says, "Atlanta is ours and fairly won." But on that day, he writes to a British abolitionist and he makes a remarkable statement.

It's either in that letter or an earlier one where he says, "If it were up to me, I would've wanted this war to end earlier if it could produce the end of slavery." It turns out in God's providence, we had a general, McClellan, who of course is Lincoln's adversary in 1864 as a Democratic nominee. We had a General McClellan, who early in the war was the go slow general, this general who never had enough troops to take on the Confederates, never wanted to put them into the fight.

Douglass said, "It was only because in God's providence that we had a general that was slow, that the war took so long." A prolonged war is what eventually produced the emancipation of Blacks in America. Douglass concedes that his original hopes for a short war proved to be wrong, and he goes on controversially to say he hopes the war would continue until Blacks not only categorically were no longer enslaved. In other words, universally through the American states, but they need to get the vote.

He doesn't think they'll get the vote unless whites still see them as integral to preserving the Union. So he actually makes an argument for a prolonged war. He says, "If the war falls short of complete emancipation and the vote for Black men, it would be murder to have engaged in this conflict." In other words, for him, contrary to Lincoln, it was not enough simply to save, as we say today, democracy. It wasn't enough to save the Constitutional Republic. Douglass did not want us to go back to the Union as it was, the Constitution as it is.

He's like, "No, the Union as it was is a slaveholding Union, one where the free states help slave states keep Black men in bondage." It is a constitution that is being interpreted in a way of facilitating kidnappings of Black men and women in the free states. It is one that facilitates the continued enslavement of Black people. And so Douglass says, "I just assume this war continue, knowing its cost in blood and treasure until the Black man gets what he deserves."

Michael Poliakoff:

This was a real anxiety for Frederick Douglass, that's to say that even as the 13th Amendment is halfway through Congress, he's really worried that there could be some kind of rapprochement that would bring an early end to the war. One gets the impression that... In fact, Ulysses Grant was labeled "The Butcher" for seeing this through the most horrible fighting to make sure that it was a victory.

Lucas Morel:

Indeed. He will praise Grant after the war as one who is doing what he can to produce what Lincoln couldn't or didn't produce, which is equal citizenship. Lincoln freed the Black man. It is up to Grant now to make the Black man an equal citizen. And so. He was hoping that that baton, skipping over Andrew Johnson, would be passed to Grant to finish the job as it were.

Michael Poliakoff:

I want to pause a little bit on the question of Black soldiers over which Douglass really criticized Lincoln. There again, it was Grant who was rather ferocious in doing his best to protect Black people from the vindictiveness, the vengefulness of the white Southerners. I wonder if you'd speak a little bit more about that.

Lucas Morel:

Well, are you speaking Grant as general or Grant as president? It's certainly the case as President Grant was doing everything he could with what morale he could muster among Northern whites, morale and money, to keep federal troops in the South to prevent the domestic terrorism that was keeping Blacks from voting, from holding office, not just Blacks, but sympathetic whites, the Republicans who went South to help secure fair trials in courts for Blacks disputing contracts, et cetera, enforcing contracts, and most particularly to secure their right to vote and to attack the Ku Klux Klan.

These were all things that were the product of Grant's leadership in Congress, post reconstruction. You got to remember, Grant entered the war. He was no abolitionist. He married into it. His wife came from a slaveholding family. Grant himself, it's kind of a bizarre tale of how Grant ended up owning a single slave, and as soon as he was able to, he freed that man. He just thought it was beneath any human being to own another human being.

That said, he was not an abolitionist. He wasn't even certainly as anti-slavery as Lincoln was. Grant was fairly neutral on the subject at the wars starting, at least his participation in the war. It's as the war continues, that Grant shifts to become a much more fervent proponent of not only emancipation and abolition, but of the rights of citizenship for Black people.

Michael Poliakoff:

If I'm not mistaken, he was also, during the prosecution of the war, very much with a strong promoter of Black soldiers within the Union Army and rather protective of them as well.

Lucas Morel:

I would say that, on my recollection, that was overt on his part only after the Emancipation Proclamation, but I could be wrong there. As I understand it, once it became a military order, and people don't know this about the Emancipation Proclamation, they just think of it as an executive order, which it is, but it was also issued as a general order or general orders, as they say.

And so, now it wasn't up to the general to decide what to do with contraband, slaves that had escaped rebel-held territory in states. It wasn't up to their political leanings or partisan biases. They were now instructed and commanded by the Commander-in-Chief, President of the United States to secure the freedom of any who made their way to the Navy or Union lines of the soldiers.

In fact, Congress had repealed the Fugitive Slave Act so that they wouldn't even have to be enlisted as it were to return the slaves of those areas that were in rebellion.

Michael Poliakoff:

I want to turn to the patriotism. I think I can use that word of Frederick Douglass.

Lucas Morel:

Sure.

Michael Poliakoff:

Even in that speech, if people read one thing by Frederick Douglass, is What to the Slave is the 4th of July, while being a harsh critic excoriating the hypocrisy of the North. Still he keeps cycling back to the ring-bolt of the Declaration and to the brilliance of the Constitution as a document of freedom. Eager to get your thoughts on that, especially in these very fraught times of ours, to recognize that one could be a critic and one could still love.

Lucas Morel:

Yeah. That speech, it's his most popular, it's his most well-known. I think it's his greatest speech for a number of reasons. One little known fact, it's not little known, just not well-publicized, is that's his coming out speech on the Constitution. That's the speech where he finally decides after a couple of years, he's an editor of his own paper now, after a couple of years of thinking out loud about, "Well, maybe the Constitution leans more towards freedom than slavery."

It's the speech where he calls it a "glorious liberty document." I have to explain that because that's cherry-picked by a lot of people to just kind of say, "Oh, now he doesn't think it enshrined slavery at all." It has to be interpreted in a particular way, which I'll get to in a second. Remember, before 1850, '51, '52, Douglass has said, most famously, when he came back from self-imposed exile from the United Kingdom, he's there for 18 months after he publishes in 1845, his first of three autobiographies, The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass and American Slaver written by himself.

In 1847, he comes back and he delivers a speech, which we title. He didn't give titles to his speeches, but we titled it, The Right to Criticize American Institutions. He says in that speech, he has no patriotism. He has no country. Essentially, how can he love a country that doesn't love him? He says, "The Constitution should be shivered into 1,000 fragments." This is Frederick Douglass in 1847, a man who was born enslaved in Maryland. He has every reason to hate America.

But by 852, he does more of his own reading. He's no longer under the tutelage of the most famous abolitionist, William Lloyd Garrison, editor of The Liberator. He's the guy who famously said, "The Constitution is a covenant with death and an agreement withheld." I mean, both passages from the Book of Isaiah and the Old Testaments. He had a very peculiar interpretation of the Bible. But at any rate, he and Douglass did think America was horrible because it enslaved Black people.

So in 1847, Douglass hates America because America hates him, doesn't treat him as a citizen, doesn't treat him as a human being. By 1852, he's editing his own newspaper. He's being more careful with what he says out loud about his opinions. He's read guys like William Goodell, Lysander Spooner, and a patron of his, one of the richest guys, if not the richest guy in New York, a guy named Garrett Smith, who was a congressman for a little bit, very much an abolitionist.

Douglass in this speech comes out in favor of the Constitution. But the first third of the speech, he is categorically all in on the founders, not simply in terms of what they achieved in the Constitution and especially the Declaration of Independence, which he says it has saving principles, eternal principles,

right? True, always everywhere for everyone. He also praises the founders as men, their courage, their willingness to sacrifice, and not settling for peace when justice is lacking.

It's very peculiar, the speech that begins with, "All praise to the founders," with absolutely no mention of their slaveholding. The very thing everybody knows is true about the founders, Douglass stays deliberately studiously silent until he says Washington could not die until he freed his slaves, a very famous allusion to Washington's Last Will and Testament, where he does free his slaves. He says, "Once Martha dies, then they will be freed." And she actually frees them ahead of time.

Washington does free one, his valet, as we would call it today. One slave on his death is freed and is basically allowed to live out his days at Mount Vernon. So you think, why is he silent about the founders at... He's able to see past their failures to notice what they achieved. That's when he pivots to the current generation. And for you guys, and he borrows from the New Testament here and he says, "We have Washington for our father." He says, "You don't look a thing like him. At least he freed his slaves."

He says, "You've got to take up the baton now. We're a young republic and what they started, well, let's finish the job. And if you want to call Washington your father, act like him." In other words, don't be content with an independent nation that isn't thoroughly free. Finish the job. What they would not do or could not do, this generation's duty and responsibility is to make sure that the very ring-bolt of this nation's destiny, "All men are created equal," make that true for all Americans, Black and white.

It's a marvelous speech and it's this deft combination, juxtaposition of what we can praise in the founders and take from them, and apply in our own day on the path to a more perfect Union.

Michael Poliakoff:

The rhetoric, as you said at the beginning, is absolutely stunning. I think about how the eyebrows were being singed of the people listening to... I'm just reading a passage. "I do not hesitate to declare with all my soul that the character and conduct of this nation never looked Blacker to me than on this 4th of July. Whether we return to the declarations of the past or to the professions of the present, the conduct of the nation seems equally hideous and revolting."

There is something really quite wonderful about the juxtaposition of vision and well-deserved criticism. That rather brings me to the work we're doing now on this national commission. We want to make sure that every college student, and of course when we say that, that will be all the people who are training to be teachers, will know the richness of this story, its ambiguities, its peaks and its valleys, and we'll have to save a little bit of time to talk about Ralph Ellison too in that regard.

Share your hopes. Mine are rather expansive that we're going to be able to get our universities, our colleges back to recognizing that if we don't share this story, if we don't really grasp those mystic chords of memory, that we are going to suffer a very, very weak future.

Lucas Morel:

Yeah. I would say if there's anything that... Well, a number of things drive my own teaching and my own research, but one of the principle guiding lights or principles for me is this idea that everything that we see is a mark in progress in this country, in this country's history, what I call the Long Civil Rights Movement. It's not just the '50s and '60s of the 20th century. It began day one.

In fact, it began even before the revolution when slaves are petitioning on the basis of what their... Illiterate men on the basis of what they're hearing, what's in the air. Some of them are literate. What they're reading in pamphlets and newspapers, they're reading the Bible and quoting the Bible, and they're reading pamphlets and newspapers that are talking about natural justice, not positive justice or justice from law, but justice from, if you will, the eternal or fixed or natural law.

They're Lockeans before they even know who John Locke is, and they're getting that from the Bible, the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man, but they're learning about government by consent. They're

learning about human equality and they're recognizing that freedom doesn't come from government. It's protected by government. It's what you're born with. It's your birthright.

And so, even the most enslaved person on American soil is becoming an American because of the Bible and the Declaration, if you will. In terms of my own career and my own teaching as a political science professor, what I mark as the Long Civil Rights Movement of U.S. history is precisely that we mark our progress by a standard that we didn't create, but what's created by a slaveholding generation.

These aren't marginal figures. The central figures of the early American Republic and the Revolution were slaveholders: Madison, Jefferson, Washington, and yet they recognized that this institution that anti-dated them, that came before, it was an institution that had to go because it was inconsistent with the new foundation of freedom that they had figured out through a number of sources, both ancient and modern, as Jefferson says in a famous letter later, that this new foundation of freedom that's expounded in the Declaration of Independence, it's by reference to those things that we mark our progress.

It's how slaves were emancipated in Massachusetts by reference to a Constitution John Adams had a strong hand in that spoke about all men born are created free and equal. The slaves said," Hey, that applies to us." And a judge said, "You're right." A document that wasn't even... No Black men in that room who wrote the Constitution for Massachusetts and it produced liberation for Quock Walker, Elizabeth Freeman, and Mumbet, that's Elizabeth Freeman.

It not only produced their individual emancipation, but it actually abolished the institution of slavery in the early 1780s in Massachusetts and then gradual manumission acts in six or seven other states of the original 13. And so, we didn't have to turn to any other country, any other philosophy, any other religion to learn what we deserve as human beings and as fellow citizens of this great land.

And so as I say, Bill Clinton, in his first inaugural speech, I think the best thing he ever said as president, perhaps throughout his entire public career, and he borrowed this from Eisenhower, he said, "There is nothing wrong with America that cannot be cured by what is right with America."

We can look to our past, and it's not that we ignore our failings, but we actually recognize those failings as failings precisely through an accurate understanding of what it was our founders believed and consistently put forth as the right, just and true principles for self-government, and what should inform the establishment of political institutions that would over time grow closer and closer to realizing the promise of liberty that's spelled out in the Declaration.

Michael Poliakoff:

Hence, that wonderful phrase of Ronald Reagan, "Informed patriotism."

Lucas Morel:

Yes. Yes, absolutely.

Michael Poliakoff:

The necessity that those of us who are in a position to affect the education system ensure that people know this story. I want to give a little shout-out to our mutual friend, Bill Allen.

Lucas Morel:

Oh, my mentor.

Michael Poliakoff:

Yes. Yes, indeed. Although I never studied with him, I would say the same thing. The essay that he's contributed to our volume, A Nation Born in a Day is abolitionist from the start, recognizing that built

into the DNA of the country, even before we recognized it, were those principles that would eventually blossom.

As you say, over time, there were many failures along the way, the very sad failure of reconstruction and all of the tragedy that ensued, but the DNA was there. It was going to make its way out. In this time of trouble in America, it seems so important that we are able to recognize that story. I know you're active on the 250th celebration. There you are. You're wearing it right on your lapel.

Well, you've been wonderfully generous with your time. I just want to ask you a little bit about your work on Ralph Ellison.

Lucas Morel:

Sure.

Michael Poliakoff:

When I first read one of the early versions of Juneteenth, and I think there's a much better critical edition out now, I thought myself-

Lucas Morel:

Three days before the shooting, but Juneteenth is good. If that's all you read, that's more than enough.

Michael Poliakoff:

It struck me as, this is our American James Joyce. This is just the most extraordinary story that gives all the peaks and the valleys. I wanted to hear from you. Something drew you to Ellison, and you've written quite a bit about it.

Lucas Morel:

Yeah. I'll try to keep this short. He's well-known or most known for a National Book Award that he received, the first Black novelist to receive the National Book Award for a novel published in 1952 called Invisible Man. Not H.G. Wells' The Invisible Man, which came much earlier. Random House didn't like the title that Ellison gave it, and Ellison said, "No, it has to be Invisible Man. That's the trope I'm using in this novel."

In reading that novel, which it was incomprehensible to me when I was in high school when I read it, nothing landed. It just boggles my mind how I could not recognize its genius at the time. I came around to it later because I started using literature in my classes, Uncle Tom's Cabin, which Bill Allen has written a whole book on. Kazuo Ishiguro's Remains of the Day. I've used Westerns, Henry V. I'm all over the map. I use literature in my classes.

I used Invisible Man a few times and Juneteenth. Let me just quote from Juneteenth. He's got a Black preacher who's watching a man whose now a race baiting senator from New England, calls himself Adam Sunraider, but he was actually raised by this Black preacher in the South. He can pass for white. If that doesn't make you want to read this crazy novel, I don't know what would.

The preacher is watching his boy as a grown man now who's turned on his people, if you will, and he turns to a member of his congregation early in the novel and he says, "Look at him. He's got them," his audience, "he's got them caught between what they profess to believe and they feel they can't do without." Wow, that verse has just stuck with me. That's America. That's America.

And because we aren't simply the product of the principle of all men are created equal, the flip side of that principle is the principle of consent because you have to ask people's permission. That's the only

legitimate form of self-government is asking their permission before you tell them what to do. Because you have to ask their permission, you got to take consent where it is.

What comes with consent isn't just, as you put it earlier, informed wisdom. You bring biases, you bring prejudices, received opinions, experience, what have you. This is a country that's been torn, and led, and driven not simply by our best version of ourselves. As Lincoln put it, the better angels of ourself, which he borrowed from Shakespeare. We're not just driven by equality. We're also in our gut, not in our mind.

Ellison said, "What we feel we can't do without," and our feelings are, dang it. If we really were all in on equality, that means I have to compete with these people. Remember, white supremacy is just a massive coverup for insecurity. If whites truly were superior, would you have to outlaw Blacks from playing in chess tournaments? This is how ridiculous this is.

Bill Allen, very late in my relationship with Bill where he shared the story about his father being this wonderful fisherman, and who was so good that the whites around him envied him and sabotaged his efforts to support his family simply by fishing. Insecure people terrorize or pass laws to make the pool of competition smaller. And so what Ellison is capturing there is realizing, yeah, these whites on a good day will acknowledge that all men are created equal, but dang it, they don't want to compete on a level of playing field.

Correction (April 2026): *In this episode of Higher Ed Now, guest Lucas Morel recounts an anecdote drawn from Habits of Mind (2003) concerning an incident of racial discrimination involving the author's father. While the story was relayed as it appears in the book (pp. 46–47), the account itself is not correct. After the book's publication, the author was contacted by the family of the vessel's owner referenced in the anecdote, who clarified that the business did not cease operation under the circumstances described but instead closed due to bankruptcy. The anecdote was originally presented in good faith based on information the author had received and had no reason to doubt at the time. Upon learning the correct account, the author committed to issuing a correction in the event of republication. This episode and its transcript constitute such a republication, and this notice fulfills that commitment in the interest of maintaining an accurate record.*

Their parents didn't want to compete with my parents. My parents were ruled out of the game. And for me, what drew me to Ellison is that very Frederick Douglassonian conviction that you know what? All men really are created equal vices or virtues, come what may. If there really is the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man, here is a country that at least claims and has written it down that these are the truths by which they want to guide themselves politically.

At the end of the day, push come to shove, they'd just as soon shove some people and keep them out of the game to make things easier for themselves. That's just human frailty, man sinfulness. This is what we have to struggle with. That's why in this day, Semiquincentennial 2026, 250th anniversary of the nation's birth as symbolized by the Declaration of Independence, as Lincoln famously put in the Gettysburg Address, "Four score and seven years ago," this is a country this year, as it looks back, can recapture the thing that unites us, the thing that makes us Americans.

It's precisely the things that we share, that there should be no debate or dispute about. We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they're endowed by the created with certain inalienable rights. Among these are life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness, and that to secure, make safe, or protect these rights, governments are instituted among men deriving their just powers from the consent of the government.

If we can't agree on those things, and I think we can, but if we can't agree on those things, we are in some trouble in terms of what it is that we can do to remain a United States of America. I think if we can get back to that language and explore what those terms mean, what those phrases mean, get back to that shared humanity that has always been the best version of ourselves when we've passed laws and amendments and created constitutions, I think if we can do that, we can pull together.

Michael Poliakoff:

I share that optimism, and you've expressed it with such wonderful eloquence, Lucas. Yes, and this of course, puts the burden right back on us as educators on educating the public, educating our school children, educating our college students. We cannot retreat from that task. We have a wonderful, important opportunity.

Michael Poliakoff:

I'm so grateful to you for all that you have done. Well, thank you for this episode of Higher Ed Now, and thank you for being on the National Commission and contributing to A Nation Born in a Day. I treasure our friendship as I treasure your scholarship. Thank you.

Lucas Morel:

Thank you, Michael. I appreciate this.

Michael Poliakoff:

Be well.

Speaker 3:

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